

From the Kalki Chronicles



THE SAGE'S SECRET

ABHINAV



PENGUIN BOOKS
THE SAGE'S SECRET

Abhinav is a Mumbai-based software developer. This is his first book.

From the Kalki Chronicles

THE SAGE'S SECRET

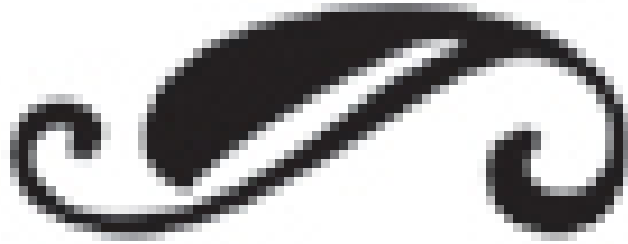
ABHINAV



PENGUIN BOOKS

*To my grandfather, P.A.J. Nair,
who introduced me to the world of
Indian mythology through his storytelling*

*Yada yada hi dharmasya
Glanir bhavati Bharata
Abhyutthanam adharmasya
Tadatmanam srjami aham*



Whenever and wherever there is a decline in righteousness, O descendant of Bharata, and a predominant rise of unrighteousness—at that time, I descend myself.

Bhagavad Gita, [Chapter 4](#), Verse 7

PROLOGUE

Dwarka, Twenty-Eight Years after the Great War of Kurukshetra

The thatched roof gleamed silver in the lightning, dripping wet in the drizzly night. The brown brick walls of the hut stood sturdy against the strong winds. Raindrops hit the roof sharply, ran down the dry brown leaves and gently fell to the ground, mixing with the sand and releasing the petrichor—the fresh, sweet smell of monsoon. Though flimsy, the straw kept the icy rainwater out of the small hut, leaving its two occupants undisturbed. They were inhabiting the humble shelter only temporarily, but were the most important people in Dwarka.

Inside the hut, a handsome dark-skinned youth inhaled deeply, as if imbibing the scent of the sand into his body. His eyes were closed; he seemed to be enjoying something as simple as the fragrant wet earth. After all, the joy of breathing in the petrichor was a privilege, one that he hadn't been able to afford for so long ... ever since he'd undertaken the duty of looking after his people. Now the earthy aroma reminded him of how blissful it was to be in the lap of nature. A small smile of satisfaction escaped his lips. Beside the cot on which he sat, standing on a wooden stool was a small oil lamp that burned bright. Its yellow light flickered in the breeze while illuminating the insides of the little hut.

The dark-skinned youth finally opened his eyes and looked at his companion, who was sitting on the adjacent cot. The man's face wore a humble smile, which lent it a childlike innocence. In stark contrast, his white beard and moustache, along with his silvery hair, made him appear wise. Though his old companion was a bit plump around the waist, the young man knew that in reality he was quite fit and agile, as well as exceptionally intelligent and very resourceful. His saffron clothes pointed to his serenity.

A man who isn't hasty. A man who calculates his every move carefully, after considering every factor, pondered the darkskinned youth. That's why

he had chosen the man for the task. He was trustworthy and loyal. Even now, the young man could observe the older one's ingenuity and diligence. For the saffron-clothed man sat holding blank, dry palm leaves in his left hand and a stone pencil in his right, ready to write down any directives given to him.

The dark-skinned youth smiled and asked the man, 'Sage Dweepa, why would you need the palm leaves and the pencil?'

Dweepa smiled back. 'My lord, we are meeting in private, at a place that is considerably far from the palace. It's after midnight, and you were secretive about the nature of the appointment when you told me to meet you here ... alone. So I presumed you have some important task that you want to tell me about. And I'm prepared to take down your instructions word for word.'

The youth laughed, admiring the sage's reasoning, which was based purely on deductions. He looked at the sage with admiration in his eyes. Dweepa was, without doubt, intelligent, but there was no sign of pride in his eyes. He was humble, just as a sage should be.

The youth spoke again. 'Sage Dweepa, you are right. The nature of this meeting is indeed secretive. No one else should know about it unless we want them to.'

'My lord?' Dweepa squinted, his brows scrunched up with doubt.

The sage studied his lord carefully. His face was breathtaking. His eyes, black like the night sky, in which mischief sparkled like the stars. A sharp nose graced his oval face. The fragrance of sandalwood emanated from his toned dusky body. His skin was his most distinguishing feature—people frequently referred to him by his swarthy tone.

Krishna, the Dark-Complexioned One, explained, 'Sage Dweepa, this meeting solely concerns me. Rather, my next incarnation.'

The sage's eyes widened in shock. He hadn't expected this. Not even in his wildest dreams had he ever thought of talking to Lord Krishna about his next avatar—or any avatar for that matter! He swallowed hard, trying to suppress the jolt he'd felt.

'M-my lord ... Your ... your n-next incarnation?'

Krishna only smiled. 'Yes. My tenth and last incarnation.'

Dweepa blinked, now truly stunned. He took a deep breath and asked softly, 'The Kalki avatar?'

Krishna nodded. 'Yes, the Kalki avatar.'

As soon as the word ‘Kalki’ escaped from Krishna’s mouth, many questions started rushing through Dweepa’s mind. *The advent of the Kalki avatar is no secret. Many in this world know about it. I heard about this avatar from Sage Vyasa himself. But why this hushed-up meeting? Is the arrival of the avatar imminent?*

Reading Dweepa’s mind, Krishna answered, ‘All in good time, O Sage.’ Dweepa nodded slowly, embarrassed.

‘My Kalki avatar will be different from the Krishna avatar. In my last avatar, I will not be as I am now—I mean ... I won’t be all-knowing as I am at the moment.’

Dweepa listened intently, his face impassive.

‘And that is why *you* must help me in my Kalki avatar. I trust you to enlighten and educate me, Sage Dweepa.’

The sage’s eyes brightened with purpose, but it was soon replaced with doubt. ‘How will *I* help you, my lord? I won’t even be alive when your Kalki avatar arrives!’

Krishna laughed. ‘You will be alive, my friend. Alive through my words. For my words!’

Dweepa glanced at Krishna, puzzled. ‘I am afraid I do not understand, my lord.’

Krishna began, ‘The knowledge that I share with you today should be perfectly preserved by you. It should be passed down generations, until the Kalki avatar arrives. Your goal, as well as your disciples’, from now on should be to help me in my tenth avatar ... when the time comes. You will die one day, but “Sage Dweepa” should exist through your disciples, as that is how I will refer to your descendent in my Kalki avatar. It’s how I will recognize him or her. Across generations, even though the person will change, their role will not. The title given to the one chosen to guide me should be yours, Sage.’

Dweepa nodded and started writing. ‘But *how* will I help you in your Kalki avatar, Lord? How am I to find Kalki?’

Krishna flashed a mischievous grin. He looked at Dweepa, a twinkle in his eyes. ‘My name won’t be Kalki ... In fact,’ he paused, ‘all the details that you—and everyone else, for that matter—have heard about my final avatar are just lies ... Lies to lead my enemies astray.’

As the truth dawned upon Dweepa, he finally understood the reason behind the secrecy and the urgency. He smiled when the name Kalki

crossed his mind now. It was just a giant hoax! And his mission, at the time of his lord's final avatar, would be that of a guide, teacher, friend and trusted ally. A cherished role.

The night progressed, the lamp's red flame dwindled and Dweepa filled leaf after leaf with instructions from his lord, which would now be followed by his disciple-descendants too. These palm leaves contained the whole truth about the Kalki avatar.



ONE

Gujarat, 2005 CE

The crowing of the cock did not disturb the man meditating in the sacrificial chamber. He sat with his legs folded, his arms stretched out, palms resting on his knees, and his eyes closed. He continued chanting, his lips moving rapidly. His long black beard, thick moustache, matted hair rolled into a bun on top of his head and dark red robes lent him the look of a rishi, a saint. But, in reality, he was the complete opposite.

Kalanayaka was a sorcerer, and all that mattered to him was power. He had made it the purpose of his life to gain more power than any other being on earth. He yearned to live beyond the bounds of a normal man, and so he performed sacrifices to gain faculties that could help him attain this goal.

Kalanayaka could feel the heat of the sacred fire rising, the wood crackling incessantly. He smiled, thinking, *Goddess Kali is growing content. She has to be satiated soon.*

The sorcerer opened his eyes. The fire was now blazing brightly. He looked to his side, at the cock trying to free itself from the cage, rattling it with all its might. Smirking at the bird's vain efforts, he picked up the small cage and spoke in a cold voice, 'You cannot escape. This room is where you will breathe your last.'

Kalanayaka moved his left arm expansively across the room. It was glowing amber from the flickering oil torches along the four walls, which were painted in alternating shades of yellow and red. Red silk curtains hung

from the pillars supporting the roof. Only two windows provided ventilation. Kalanayaka looked down at the ceremonial arrangements before him. At the centre of the preparations was the sacrificial fire, boxed in by three stacks of red clay bricks. Surrounding them were designs made from coloured rice flour. Behind the fire was a black stone idol of Goddess Kali. It was about five feet tall and gleamed in the firelight. The idol was wrapped in blood-red cloth. The forehead was smeared with vermillion, and the neck adorned with a garland of wild red flowers. One hand held a sword, while the other clutched the severed head of a man. She was dancing atop a headless body.

Gazing at the magnificent idol, Kalanayaka smiled. His chest swelled with pride for he was about to please one of the fiercest goddesses in the whole universe. As the fire crackled even louder, he turned his attention to the sacrifice again. *I shouldn't keep the goddess waiting.*

He put the cage down and opened it. Slowly, he brought the rooster out, maintaining a firm grip on the bird. It was crowing softly now, perhaps realizing the inevitability of the moment. Kalanayaka held the bird in his left hand and picked up the sacrificial knife lying next to him with his right. The knife, though pure silver, glowed gold in the firelight. He lifted his lean frame off the floor, bowed to the goddess and faced the fire.

The sorcerer held the cock above the blaze, with the knife to its throat. Feeling the hot flames trying to lick its body, the bird resumed its struggle, crowing helplessly again. But Kalanayaka was unperturbed. The ritual was tricky and it required his full concentration. Three drops of blood had to be offered to the fire, but dripping only from the silver knife. He slowly pressed the blade into the cock's throat. A few moments later, he could see a crimson line appear on its neck. He pushed the knife in a bit deeper.

As soon as the ruby liquid oozed generously on to the blade, Kalanayaka swiftly pulled back both his hands. He then extended the knife above the fire and tilted it slightly to make the blood drip into the flames. But he didn't want too much of it for that would spoil the sacrifice. To his relief, the blood slowly trickled down the edge of the blade and reached the point. For a moment a droplet swung on the tip and then fell into the blaze just as another formed at the tip. Kalanayaka counted three drops and then tilted the knife upwards, bringing it away from the fire. Like an angry snake, it hissed; the drops of blood had vanished in the burning embers.

Hearing the sizzle, Kalanayaka's eyes shone with happiness. *My sacrifice has been accepted! ... well, at least the first part of it*, he muttered to himself, attempting to contain his excitement.

The next step was to offer blood directly from the cock's neck. Kalanayaka brought both his hands over the flames once again. He returned the knife to the cock's neck—the bird now flailing madly with fear—and slowly pressed it against the throat. Once again blood started oozing from the soft neck. Taking the knife away, he gently squeezed the bird's throat. Red droplets came forth and this time, freely dripped into the fire. After hearing the familiar hiss, Kalanayaka eased the pressure on the bird's throat.

The final part was to sacrifice the head to the goddess. So the sorcerer held the knife high, a mixture of anticipation and lust for power simmering in his eyes. In his other hand the half-dead creature struggled weakly to escape its fate. But the cock's helplessness only fuelled Kalanayaka's excitement, filling him with a strange sense of ecstasy. *'Jai Ma Kali!'*

With a cry praising the goddess, Kalanayaka brought down the knife. One swift strike! The gleam of silver that entered the cock's throat emerged from the other end bathed in crimson. The bird's head, now sliced clean from its body, fell into the blazing fire. Glowing golden-yellow, it consumed the offering.

Kalanayaka watched the fire, his eyes dancing with happiness. But a strange anxiety still lurked in them. As the bird's head turned to ash, he glanced at the goddess's idol and back at the flames. The fire crackled steadily for a few moments and then a burst of flare erupted. Kalanayaka's joy now knew no bounds.

Goddess Kali's blessings are upon me! She is satisfied with my sacrifice! Now she will never forsake me ... She will be with me, always, blessing me with victory!

As the burst dwindled and the fire settled down, Kalanayaka looked at the headless body of the bird in his hand thoughtfully ... There was another ritual that he wanted to try.

Though the rituals performed to please Kali concluded with the offering of the head, there was another ceremony that wasn't much spoken of. He had read about it once in a scripture, but not many details had been provided. The brief simply said that it required offering the whole body to the goddess, along with the chanting of complex incantations. Many had tried to do so, but had failed to please the goddess. Kalanayaka, however,

was desperate to earn Kali's favour. The benefits, if he did so, would be enormous.

The sorcerer thought hard. *Though the script said that the whole body of the rooster is to be offered, it didn't mention 'how' it is to be done. And that's the catch ... There has to be some specific way to offer the sacrifice ... Such a unique way that the goddess will be pleased, immensely!*

Kalanayaka clutched the knife tight, desperately trying to figure out the right way. As he pondered about what he could do, he felt the fingers of his left hand becoming wet. He looked down, irritated. Blood was flowing out of the cock's throat on to his fingers. He shook his head, disgusted that such a small thing was disturbing his concentration, and turned to the fire, his mind trying to decipher the sacrifice.

Then all of a sudden, he looked at his palms soaked in blood. He rubbed his fingers slowly, smelling the blood in the air. He could almost taste the iron on his tongue. His eyes shut briefly as he was flooded with a feeling of euphoria. When he opened his eyes, they wore a curious look. *Could it be so simple ... that no one had thought of it? Just offer the body head first into the fire?* Kalanayaka knew that was way too simple. *But the incantations are complex. I need to be mindful of them.*

Even as he recollected the simplistic instructions of the script and the incantation in it, he knew that he needed to add to the ritual's details. And come what may, the sorcerer had to offer the bird to the fire at a specific point during the invocation and continue chanting without getting distracted by the fire consuming his sacrifice.

Kalanayaka let the knife fall to the ground with a clatter and held his sacrifice with both hands. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, drawing all his attention inwards. He recalled the lengthy chant, which had taken him fifteen days of dedicated recitation to memorize. He was aware of how crucial the invocations were to this ritual. One misspoken word, and the incantation could lead to his doom, rather than his prosperity. He couldn't help but think of how one wrong utterance had caused Kumbhakarna to be asleep for six long months. Kalanayaka shuddered. Bringing his focus back to the incantation, he opened his eyes and looked at the fire.

He inhaled deeply and started chanting. After what seemed like hours, he slowly tilted the cock downwards, its neck facing the fire. Chanting still, he

let the lifeless body fall into the orange flames. Wheezing loudly, the fire glowed red and started consuming the sacrifice hungrily.

Kalanayaka closed his eyes to focus and uttered the incantation even louder, so that he could concentrate on his voice rather than the crackling, spitting fire. Beads of perspiration slid down his forehead, but he ignored them with a resolve. He kept chanting through gnashed teeth.

After a few minutes, Kalanayaka finished the invocation, opened his eyes and glanced down at the fire. Wrapping the decapitated feathered body in its burning embrace, the fire spewed jets of orange. Kalanayaka turned to the idol, elated. With tears of happiness in his eyes, he went down on his knees and touched the goddess's feet with his head. *Ma Kali has accepted the sacrifice! She has blessed me!*

Kalanayaka wiped his tears and looked at the fire. It was now slowly dying out. His mind, however, was still lit with the orange flames that had engulfed his sacrifice. The sorcerer slowly got up, joined his hands, bowed his head and thanked the goddess and the sacred fire again. He took one last look at the goddess's idol and then turned to leave the room.

The goddess has showered her blessings on me. The flames meant just that. Goddess Kali will help me fulfil my destiny now. She will support me in my mission.

Kalanayaka laughed softly. There was nothing more he could've asked for. But as he walked away, the laughter was replaced by anger. For so long, he'd had only one mission in life: eliminate Vishnu's Kalki avatar. And he was eager to begin.



TWO

Outskirts of Dwarka, Gujarat, 2005 CE

Dweepa entered his humble home on the banks of River Gomati. Though it was a little far from the river, the sounds of the soft waves could be clearly heard inside the house. It was this rhythmic sound that calmed Dweepa's senses when he meditated.

The sage headed for his puja room and settled on the floor, facing the idols and framed photos of the various deities. On a plate, he gently arranged the flowers he had collected from his garden and looked around. The open window bathed the room in a warm orange hue, ushering in the sunset.

Starting his rituals, Dweepa lit the oil lamp. The flame instantly cast its luminescence on the idols. The sage looked at his most loved deity—a sky-blue idol of a handsome young man. A garland of tulsi leaves adorned his neck, a peacock feather decorated his crown and a golden flute was held to his lips. The idol that stood before the sage was designed intricately—a striking statue of Lord Krishna. His lord's eyes were attractive and twinkled with hidden mischief, reminding Dweepa of the tales of Krishna's pranks as a child.

Behind the idol, on the wall towards the right, was a hand-painted portrait of an old sage seated under a banyan tree. It was the likeness of Dweepa's ancestor, the original Sage Dweepa, the one who had lived during Krishna's time. He was the sage to whom Krishna had entrusted the truth

about the Kalki avatar. Since then, several generations of Dweepas had passed; their sole goal: to assist the last avatar of Lord Vishnu when the time came.

The present-day Sage Dweepa was very young compared to the one in the portrait. His short black beard and moustache gave him the look of an adolescent with a grown man's facial hair. But the truth was that the sage was in his late twenties, and his toned and flexible body was the fruit of daily exercise.

Dweepa lit some incense sticks in front of Krishna's idol. The fumes slowly rose and swirled in the air, spreading all around. Dweepa inhaled deeply, taking in the fragrance. Sandalwood—his lord's favourite incense! As Dweepa waved the sticks in front of the idol, he noticed something odd about the echo of Gomati's waves. His ears were accustomed to its calm rhythm, and he could easily recognize when they were not in sync. Like now.

Dweepa peered outside the window. It was dark, the sun already having set. The erratic crashing of the waves shouldn't have bothered him, as that did happen sometimes. But today it seemed unnatural, significant even.

He looked up at the pitch-black sky and felt as if something monumental was about to happen. A sense of foreboding filled him. He found the surroundings to be eerily silent, except for the unrhythmic waves of the river. No whistling of the breeze, no chatter of the crickets, no night sounds ... It was perfectly quiet. Only Gomati was awake, as if it was about to go into spate.

Dweepa shrugged his shoulders, trying to shake off his misgivings, and placed the incense sticks on the stand in front of Krishna's idol. The feeling of foreboding, however, continued to nag at him.

He placed the plate containing the flowers in his lap. Taking one in his hand, he closed his eyes and started offering prayers to Krishna. At regular intervals, he presented a flower at his lord's feet. Once Dweepa completed his prayers, he set the plate on the floor. He bowed his head to his lord as well as his ancestor.

As he got up, he heard a peal of rumbling thunder. And with what sounded like a crack of a whip, it started raining. Dweepa rushed to the front door to close it before the rain splattered inside his home. But as he reached the threshold, he found that it was already pouring. The wind was

blowing wildly, howling and bending the trees. ‘Looks like the monsoon has arrived,’ he muttered.

No sooner had he completed the sentence, than he heard another loud clap of thunder, this time accompanied by lightning. If it had been an ordinary flash of purple-white lightning, he wouldn’t have bothered and shut the door immediately. But the lightning tonight was unlike any he’d ever seen. For it was not the ordinary flare of white lightning—it glistened red! In that suspended moment, the whole sky glowed like a ruby. It was as if someone had painted, or rather mercilessly splattered, the sky with blood. The sight sent a chill down his spine.

Dweepa blinked, doubting his own eyes. Had he truly seen such a frightening scene? Then, as if in confirmation, the sky roared with its loudest thunderclap and flared red again! The flash illuminated the fear on the sage’s face. Dweepa could feel the hair on his arms and neck standing on end. But his fear was momentary, for it was quickly replaced by doubt. An impossible thought had struck him. ‘Could I be that lucky?’ he wondered aloud.

The sage shut the door and hurried towards his puja room. Though he had some reservations, he was beginning to feel quite sure of what he had seen. Now he wanted to confirm if the thought that had come to him was true; if what he had seen was what it meant.

He entered the lamplit puja room, the fragrance of sandalwood lingering in the air. It calmed Dweepa. He knelt before Krishna’s idol and bowed down to his lord. He then turned to his ancestor’s portrait and bowed to him too. Dweepa breathed deeply and looked at his ancestor’s face. Closing his eyes, he thought about the omens he had seen a few moments ago.

Unrhythmic waves in the river, strong winds, torrential rain, loud thunder.

Omens such as these had appeared before—only once before in history. At the time of Lord Krishna’s birth! These signs that he’d witnessed, the blood-red lightning in particular, could indicate one thing, and one thing only.

Kalki had been born.

The sage didn’t know where, but somewhere in this world, at that very moment, Lord Krishna had been born again to fulfil the Kalki avatar!



THREE

Kalanayaka was resting in a cane armchair in the veranda of his cottage as he watched the sun going down over the horizon. Enjoying the moment, he closed his eyes, leaned back and started thinking about the sacrifice he had made that morning. He was feeling especially proud today.

The sorcerer smiled to himself. He opened his eyes and saw that half the sun was already submerged. He shut his eyes again and let his mind drift to his teenage years.

Back then, Kalanayaka wasn't known as Kalanayaka. He went by his birth name, Ajith. He attended the *gurukul*, and was interested in Hindu philosophy and mythology. In particular, Ajith was fascinated by the villains in these scriptures, like Narakasura, Ravana and others. The magnitude of the powers they possessed captivated him.

Towards the end of his teenage years, Ajith's interest in black magic and sorcery grew exponentially, reaching the heights of an obsession. Not only did he want to master the same abilities that his idols possessed, he wanted to surpass them. What he did not know was that his guru had noticed his young disciple's interest and exceptional talent.

The day he was summoned by his teacher was still vivid in Kalanayaka's mind.

A young man wearing yellow robes, the *gurukul* uniform, was seated in front of his guru under a banyan tree. He was tall and strong, with a healthy physique. His guru was in his late forties, with a long black beard and his hair twisted in a bun at the top of his head. The older

man was wearing red robes, which outlined his slightly muscular built. He was reading the Vedic slokas from the palm leaves in his hand and explaining each one to his student, when he paused. 'Ajith,' his guru spoke softly, 'next week you will turn twenty-two. It is time you learnt some real skills that you can use in the outside world. Skills that will help you achieve success in your mission.'

Ajith looked questioningly at his guru. 'My mission?'

'Yes, your mission, Ajith.'

Ajith cleared his throat and asked, 'What ... what is my mission, Guruji?'

The guru smiled. 'Of all the students in the gurukul, Ajith, you are the brightest and most resourceful, as well as quite hard-working. You show promise. So I am assigning this mission to *you*.'

Ajith's chest swelled with pride. He smiled, listening to the praises heaped on him.

'What you have to understand first,' his guru continued, 'is that the mission is being assigned to you only because you are capable of it.'

Ajith nodded. He was impatient to know what his mission was.

His teacher spoke again. 'Your mission is to eliminate the Kalki avatar.'

Ajith's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. He couldn't believe his ears, shocked as he was at the words that had come out of his guru's mouth. Then, breathing slowly, he gathered his thoughts, trying to absorb what he had just heard. He was aware of the Dashavatar of Lord Vishnu and of Kalki—the avatar he would assume in the Kali yuga, the present era. Kalki—the tenth and last avatar of Vishnu.

My mission is to eliminate Kalki ... Vishnu's avatar? It sounds like a suicide mission! he thought to himself.

Ajith gulped, but did not make his fear visible to the teacher. He desperately wanted a drink of water. His throat had gone dry after learning of his 'mission'.

'So next week onwards,' the guru's voice stopped his train of thought and brought his focus back to the conversation, 'you will start learning sorcery. It is of the utmost importance that you learn these skills. For they will aid you in defeating Kalki.'

Ajith nodded slowly. Even though the concept of the dark arts fascinated him, he was too shocked to be happy about the fact that he

was finally getting to learn them.

‘Till then, revise all the fighting stances. Make sure you understand and remember everything that has been taught to you.’

Ajith nodded again and got up. He bowed to his guru and returned to his hut. Only two words ran through his mind: *kill Kalki*.

The rumbling thunder brought Kalanayaka back to the present. He looked at the inky overcast sky, from which tiny droplets of water had started falling. The sun had set. It was almost time for his evening prayers.

Kalanayaka quickly got up from his chair and heaved it inside his house, lest it get wet. With a shallow pant, he placed the chair next to the window. He went out again to see if he had missed anything, when the wind started blowing fiercely, rustling the dry leaves on the ground. Almost instantly it began pouring heavily from the dark, dense clouds.

The sorcerer was about to retreat inside his cottage, when a loud thunderclap reverberated all around and the dark sky flashed a bloody red. He blinked, unable to comprehend what had just happened. As he stood trying to understand this anomaly, thunder boomed again and the sky blazed red.

Kalanayaka took in a sharp breath, horror written all over his face. It had happened once again, right before his eyes. He wasn't dreaming after all. It made for a terrifying sight—as if the blood he had offered to the sacrificial fire was flowing into the sky. The sorcerer rushed into his house, closing the door behind him. He rested his back against the shut door, panting heavily.

Once his breathing returned to normal, he slowly walked over to the window overlooking the veranda and peeked out. The rain was still coming down in sheets, but the sky was black.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Kalanayaka walked to the puja room to offer his evening prayers.



FOUR

Dweepa hurriedly took his ancestor's portrait off the wall and placed it gently on the floor. He then turned to the wall and ran his finger down the nail from which the portrait had hung. He kept going until he felt a small circular depression. He pushed it, and a section of the wall below the depression swung open, revealing a small cavity behind it.

The sage opened the secret panel fully and looked inside. There sat a bundle of brown palm leaves, tied together with a worn jute thread. He took out the bundle and closed the panel.

Briskly walking to the centre of the room, the sage sat in front of Krishna's statue. Touching the bundle to his forehead, the disciple inhaled deeply, invoking the blessings of his lord and ancestors. He ran his fingers over the stack, recollecting the tale of his lord's foresight. Knowing full well that the truth in the leaves was instrumental to the future of the universe, Lord Krishna had cast a spell of preservation over the notes with his heavenly touch. That's how the bundle had sustained the passage of time spanning centuries.

Dweepa gently pulled the thread holding the palm leaves together and opened the bundle. The leaves were free of dust, for he wiped the bundle clean every morning after the puja. He touched the bundle to his forehead once again and read the first leaf. A single word at the centre. In his ancestor's bold inscription, the Sanskrit word read:

KALKI

He turned the leaf and started reading the next one. His ancestor, the first Sage Dweepa, had written down the instructions given by Lord Krishna word for word. However, those weren't the only things passed down the generations. Dweepa had also narrated the night's events to his successor, like any great religious scripture, albeit a secret one. This practice had continued through the ages—the passing down of the sequence of events, a story that was told to all the Sage Dweepas to have lived on this earth. So when he was handed the instructions, the current Sage Dweepa, too, was told the legend of that night by his predecessor.

Thus, when he read the instructions today, Dweepa could imagine the original exchange as if it were unfolding before his eyes. A complete picture took shape in front of him, from the rain outside to Krishna's mischievous smile. The sage flipped through the palm leaves until he reached the page he wanted to read.

The raindrops pattered on the roof like small pebbles. Sage Dweepa looked at Krishna, waiting for his lord to speak.

'I won't be what I am in my current avatar when I am born as Kalki. I will be born a common man and won't be all-knowing.' Krishna laughed softly.

'Why are you laughing, my lord?' Dweepa asked.

Krishna gave him a mysterious smile. 'Because I am not going to be born as Kalki after all, Sage Dweepa!'

'Then why the name Kalki?'

'Kalki is the name of my avatar, but it won't be my birth name. Unlike my past avatars, all of whom were born with their avatar names ... Parashurama was born as Rama, then there was Balarama, now Krishna ... And as you know, Sage, the rest of the avatars were named after their appearances—Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha ...'

Dweepa tried to grasp the logic behind his lord's words, but couldn't completely understand.

'I'm not sure I follow, my lord,' Dweepa said, doubt evident in his tone.

Krishna smiled.

A gust of cool air entered the hut through the window. The lamp illuminating the insides flickered, but did not die. After the breeze ceased, the light regained its steady glow and burnt more fiercely, as if

in defiance. Krishna watched this act of the flame with amusement. He responded to the question, his eyes still fixed on the flame.

‘In the Kali yuga, my enemies will be strong. Strongest would be a better word. They will try, by all means necessary, to eliminate me, because I will be the only one who stands between them and the fulfillment of their corrupt desires. I will be the obstacle preventing them from fully achieving their evil goals.’

Dweepa nodded. Krishna shifted his gaze from the lamp to Dweepa. ‘Kansa was but one person, a single enemy. You know how ruthless he was in his quest to destroy me! I fought his demons my entire childhood. But I wasn’t harmed by Kansa because I was all-knowing. I knew who the demons were; I could identify them. But I will not be all-knowing as Kalki. I will be born a common man, a normal child. I will not know who my enemy is, nor who my true friends are. I won’t be able to distinguish between them ... I will be extremely vulnerable. My enemies can take advantage of that.’

Krishna paused, glancing at the lamp again, which danced in the light wind.

‘Times will change in the Kali yuga. The way things work will be much advanced. So advanced that any person in the world can know that I have been born that very week of my arrival. And I am being modest. They could even know about my existence within the span of a day, an hour, minutes or even seconds. So I can’t be born as Kalki. To avoid being detected by my enemies, Kalki won’t be my birth name. That way, when my enemies try to track me by my name, they will not be able to find me.’

Dweepa smiled at the ingenuity of the idea. Krishna smiled back. He kept his elbows on his knees and cupped his chin with his palm as he continued. ‘In my current birth, you and I saw just one powerful enemy—Kansa. But in the Kali yuga, every single enemy of mine will be as bad as Kansa. Probably worse ...’

Dweepa nodded gravely. It was inevitable. According to what he’d heard at Vyasa’s oral renditions of the four yuga, evil would be dominant in the Kali yuga. It would rise and grow to unimaginable proportions. Man would not be human. At least not all men would be human. Dweepa shook his head sadly and quickly wrote down what his lord had said.

‘My lord, you said you will be born as a common man. Does that mean you won’t be born with the *ashta* siddhis, as the world thinks you will be?’

Krishna shook his head. ‘You are right. I won’t be born with the *ashta* siddhis.’

Creases of worry appeared on the sage’s forehead. ‘But how will Kalki realize the purpose of his avatar if he doesn’t possess the siddhis?’

Krishna, seeing the sage frown, said, ‘There are always other ways to fulfil my avatar, O Sage. *Ashta* siddhis, I can learn if I want to ...’

Dweepa looked at Krishna questioningly.

‘Your descendant can teach me some of the siddhis,’ Krishna said with a grin.

Listening to his lord’s words, the creases on Dweepa’s forehead melted away, and he wrote down all the details faithfully.

After Dweepa finished, he looked up. Krishna was smiling as he played with the peacock feather from his crown. He was caressing each strand of the feather, from its root to its tip. His lord’s smile had a special quality. Whenever Dweepa looked at his lord’s smiling face, he felt its warmth radiating through his own being. But at times, the same smile exuded a sense of mischief and knowledge to which only his lord was privy.

Now Dweepa grew curious to learn how his descendent would come to know about his lord’s anonymous birth in the Kali yuga. If his mission was to help his lord in his Kalki avatar, then he needed to know when his lord would be born!

Dweepa was about to ask this, when his lord spoke. ‘If my birth in the Kali yuga is a secret, then how will you know that I have been born?’

The sage was stunned, but he recovered quickly. He was aware of his lord’s ability to know what a person was thinking at any given moment. Krishna grinned broadly.

‘At times, I have to know what goes on inside a person’s mind. It helps me know if he is an ally or a foe. But in your case, I wanted to know if you have any qualms,’ the lord explained.

Dweepa bowed. ‘A blessing with which you won’t be born in the Kalki avatar?’

Krishna nodded ruefully, still playing with the peacock feather. ‘No. A blessing with which I won’t be born in the next yuga.’ He sighed and set the feather aside.

‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘back to the question you had on your mind.’ Dweepa looked on, readying his stone pencil. ‘How will you know of my birth as the Kalki avatar?’ Krishna muttered, rubbing his hands, deep in thought. Then he joined his palms, rested them on his lips and closed his eyes.

After a few moments, Krishna opened them and folded his arms. ‘First, let me tell you about the location of my birth. The world will believe that I will be born in Shambala, but that won’t be the case. I will be born here. Kalki’s birthplace will be where Dwarka once stood.’

Dweepa looked at his lord confused. ‘Where Dwarka *once* stood? Will ... will the city be destroyed, my lord?’

Krishna turned to Dweepa. He saw great concern in the sage’s dark eyes.

‘That’s a story for a different time, Sage Dweepa.’ Krishna smiled a melancholy smile. ‘But know this: when Kalki is born, the signs will be the same as the ones at the time of my birth—heavy rains, strong winds and floods.’

Krishna paused for a few seconds and then continued. ‘In the Kali yuga, torrential rains and floods will be a common occurrence. So to distinguish my birth from similar events, the skies will turn red with flashes of lightning.’

Dweepa stared at his lord, wide-eyed, and gulped.

Heavy rains, strong gusts of wind and red flashes in the sky. So it had all come true, exactly as Lord Krishna had described.

Dweepa gathered the bundle of leaves and touched the palm-leaf book to his forehead eagerly. His happiness knew no bounds! He was to serve his lord!

He tied the leaves together and carefully kept the aged manuscript back in its secret hiding place. He closed the wooden panel and placed his ancestor’s portrait back on the wall. Then he sat down in front of the idol and shut his eyes, trying to calm his breathing. Joining his hands in prayer,

he bowed to the idol many a time. The smile on the sage's face reflected his barely contained excitement.

Dweepa got up and looked out of the window. It was then that it dawned on him that it hadn't stopped raining. Just like during Lord Krishna's birth, it was to rain ceaselessly throughout the night.

The next day, Dweepa found out through the newspaper that due to the incessant rains, floods had occurred in major parts of Gujarat. *Gujarat!* The state to which Dwarka would have belonged if it had not perished, like his lord had said it would.

Just one thought nagged at him. *The Kalki avatar wasn't supposed to be born for at least another 2000 years. Then why has he taken birth so soon?*



FIVE

Karnataka, 2005 CE

The forest was still, except for the gentle breeze that blew through the trees, rustling the leaves. A group of men sat around a large fire, its flames glowing with bright shades of yellow and orange. The wood crackled as the fire slowly ate through it. At the head of the circle sat a man wearing a billowy red cloak, his face hidden behind a long red hood. All that was visible of this man were his spindly, dark fingers. Another man, wearing a black cloak, his face, too, obscured by a hood, stood behind him. The people sitting around them were wearing saffron robes, like the ones worn by ascetics.

The red-cloaked man cleared his throat and spoke, looking around the group of men. 'I am glad that all of you could make it here at such short notice.'

The men bowed respectfully.

'I am sure all of you are anxious to know why I have called for you. The time, my friends, has finally come ...'

The men looked at each other, not comprehending what their leader was alluding to.

'Those of you who observed the sky on this day last week would have seen a strange sight in the evening.'

The men looked at each other again, blank expressions across their faces. A few of them shook their heads.

‘The sky was awash with blood!’ the red-cloaked man announced.

A collective gasp rose from his acolytes. ‘That’s ... th-that’s impossible, my lord,’ one of them said.

The man nodded. ‘Yes, it is indeed. But it has happened ... I have it on very good authority that this—this sign would appear when the Kalki avatar arrives on earth.’

A loud gasp escaped the men.

‘Does this mean—’ one of them started to ask, but was cut short.

‘Yes ... Kalki has taken birth! He is finally here.’

There was a pregnant silence.

The man in the red cloak continued after a few moments of savouring the effect the revelation had had on the men around him. ‘It’s time to move ahead with our plans. Start recruiting more children. Train them well. Train them to not just be warriors, but also killers!’

The group of men bowed.

The red-cloaked man stood up. ‘When the time comes, I want an army of skilled sorcerers at my disposal.’

The men tipped their heads in understanding.

The leader then glanced at the man in the black cloak standing behind him, signalling that it was time to leave. The black-cloaked man nodded. And with a loud crack, they both vanished into thin air.



SIX

Chennai, Tamil Nadu, 2025 CE

The football rolled along the edge of the road, gathering mud in the drizzle. A six-foot-tall, swarthy, well-built boy trailed it, a nonchalant air about him. He was not bothered about the gentle downpour from the sky. When he got a clear shot, he swiftly kicked the ball towards his teammate. The other boy raced and got it under his control, dribbling it towards the opponent's goal, which was a gap between two bricks placed twelve feet apart. The boys were playing gully football, with each team having five players, an old football to toss about and bricks for makeshift goals. The dark-skinned boy darted towards his opponent's post, drops of rain streaming down his face. His teammate, observing the movement, booted the ball back to the boy.

The ball whizzed past the defender, who had stuck his leg out in hopes of stopping it. But the dark-skinned boy was too quick; he'd already rushed forward to claim the ball. His focus was hard to crack as his team needed just one more goal to win. At present, the score was tied—2–2. The boy stopped the ball, aimed at the wide gap between the left goal-brick and the goal-keeper's right leg and kicked. The goalkeeper raised his hands to block the ball, but was late by a fraction of a second. The ball flew past the goalkeeper, barely missing his fingers, into the goal.

Amid the shouts and screams of victory, the dark-skinned boy rushed to his teammates to celebrate. They thumped his back. Even his opponents

came over to cheer him.

‘Nice kick, Anirudh!’

‘Good job, dude!’

‘What a goal, man!’

In their drenched clothes, the boys walked to their housing complex, which was only a couple of minutes away. All of them lived in the same apartment complex, comprising five blocks, and played on the abandoned road behind it. Not only that, they had attended the same school and now were in the same college. They were set to enter the third and final year of their graduation. As the boys slowly made their way to their complex, they discussed some of the spectacular moments of the match.

Anirudh was in the centre of the moving group. He walked while softly kicking the ball ahead of him, listening to the chatter and adding his two cents every now and then. As they reached their courtyard, the friends waved each other goodbye and, fishing out the keys from his capri pants, Anirudh kicked the football up into his hands. Entering his first-floor flat, Anirudh tucked the grimy football in the corner behind the door.

Nobody was home. His parents had gone to their offices. His father, Bhaskar, worked at an MNC as its regional marketing head. His mother, Mohini, worked at a financial consultancy firm as the head of its Risk division.

Anirudh had been born in Gujarat. But one year after his birth, his father was offered a promotion and transfer to the MNC’s Chennai branch. Because of his South Indian roots and command over Tamil, Bhaskar was deemed well-suited to take over the operations of the region. So the family shifted to Chennai, the economic capital of south India. And they had lived there ever since.

Anirudh freshened up and headed to the kitchen to grab a bite to eat. He wolfed down a couple of biscuits and, pouring himself a tall glass of apple juice, slumped on the couch in front of the TV. His vacation had started just the previous day and, as a result, he had a lot of spare time and not much to do with it.

It was almost six in the evening. His quota of outdoor activity for the day had come to an end. He contemplated his remaining options. *Watch TV, play games on his PC or read a book?* Anirudh decided he would do all three, one after the other. So he watched a couple of sitcoms, played a fantasy game for half an hour and then started on a spy thriller. He liked spy

thrillers as well as quest-based adventures. But he was an even bigger fan of Indian mythology.

When his parents returned a couple of hours later, he went to the gym on the top floor of his building and worked out with his friends. It was his daily routine, and Anirudh liked to keep his body in good shape. He loved being fit, and took great pride in it.

It was almost 10 p.m. when Anirudh retired to his room after dinner, over which his parents and he discussed their day. Sleep was creeping up on him. But he sat determined on the edge of the bed, a frown on his face. For he was scared of sleeping.

How I wish I didn't see those strange dreams every night!

Anirudh cupped his face with his palms and closed his eyes. The dreams had started around a month ago and came to him like weird flashes that he never seemed to forget. Even though he tried his best. He couldn't find any reason why he was seeing these strange visions. And they seemed to get more elaborate over time.

In one dream, Anirudh saw himself walking down a road in some ancient city, dressed as a king, adorned in expensive clothes, an exquisite crown and beautiful ornaments. In another, he was slowly making his way into a dense jungle, alone at night, as rain came down softly on him. In yet another dream, he thought he was floating in the air but later realized that he was being carried in a wicker basket, while huge walls of water rose all around him. It had been pouring heavily. As he'd looked up, he'd seen a many-headed snake forming a roof over him, protecting him from the harsh rain.

Being an avid reader of Indian mythology, Anirudh was aware that particular dream was about the journey of baby Krishna from the prison in Mathura, where he was born, to Gokul, where he was brought up. Anirudh was even more perplexed when he realized that all of these visions were in the first person and that some of these dreams corresponded exactly with what he had read in mythological stories! He was Krishna on the road and in the basket! What he couldn't figure out was their connection with him and why *he* was seeing them night after night.

Anirudh lifted his head and reluctantly lay down in the cool bed. He consoled himself by reasoning that his mind was only recreating the stories he had read, with a first-person point of view, just like in some of the games he played. Resolving so, he slowly drifted to sleep.

Little did he know that that night's dream was going to change his life forever.

Anirudh was seated on a cot inside a hut. An old man, dressed in saffron clothes, was sitting on a cot adjacent to his. It was raining outside, and inside, an oil lamp illuminated the hut. The old man was observing Anirudh, who stared at the ground. Then he felt himself floating away from his body and the scene, and now he was looking at the old man and what he thought was his own self from a third-person view. Anirudh peered closely at the figure seated where he was just a moment ago. The sight of him sent shivers down his spine. Anirudh couldn't believe it! The man was dark-skinned and had a striking resemblance to him ... but it wasn't him. In fact, he looked a few years older than Anirudh was at present.

Then the dark-skinned man spoke. 'I won't be what I am in my current avatar when I am born as Kalki. I will be born a common man and won't be all-knowing.' He laughed softly.

The elder man asked, 'Why are you laughing, my lord?'

With a mischievous smile, the youth replied, 'Because I am not going to be born as Kalki after all, Sage Dweepa!'

'Then why the name Kalki?'

'Kalki is the name of my avatar, but it won't be my birth name.'

Dweepa's face wore a question mark. 'I didn't get you, my lord.'

Lord Krishna smiled. Then, all of a sudden, everything became still. The rains couldn't be heard, the lamp stopped flickering and Dweepa froze. It was as if time had stopped in its tracks.

Krishna slowly turned to where Anirudh was standing and said softly, 'I will be born as Anirudh.'

It seemed as though the lord had stepped out of the events of the dream and was speaking to him directly, without Dweepa being aware of it! Anirudh was rooted to the spot.

Then time unfroze and things went back to normal.

Krishna folded his arms and spoke. 'First, let me tell you about the location of my birth. The world will believe that I will be born in Shambala, but that won't be the case. I will be born here. Kalki's birthplace will be where Dwarka once stood.'

Krishna locked eyes with Anirudh once again and smiled.

Anirudh opened his eyes with a start. *What was that?* his mind screamed.

He sat up in bed, bathed in sweat. Wiping his wet forehead with the sleeve of his T-shirt, Anirudh looked around his room trying to make sense of what he had seen. Everything seemed to be blurred. He reached for the glass of water by his bedside and gulped it down in one go. Catching his breath, he lay back in his bed.

‘Wh-what did that dream mean?’ he muttered.

He rubbed his eyes. Then he rubbed his forehead. It was something he did when he wanted to focus, to gather his thoughts.

‘These ... these dreams are getting out of hand. I should stop reading so many thrillers and playing these video games. The stories must have made up the dream,’ he consoled himself.

Assuring himself that it was the work of his too-creative mind, Anirudh closed his eyes.

It looked like I was Krishna. Hah ... Talk about an overactive imagination! Anirudh smiled doubtfully at his whimsy. *Otherwise, how could the name ‘Anirudh’ have been uttered by Krishna so precisely? And Krishna even looked like me!*

Anirudh smirked. Now somewhat at ease, he let his mind drift to the other things that he had seen and tried to rationalize them too.

Kalki will be born in a place where Dwarka once stood. So that’s all right because I wasn’t born where Dwarka stood ... It’s somewhere in the west. If I am not wrong, Dwarka would have been a part of ...

In a flash, Anirudh’s eyes fluttered opened.

Oh my God! It couldn’t be ... His heart rate shot up. Beads of sweat started forming on his forehead.

‘Dwarka would have been part of Gujarat! And I was born in Gujarat!’ Anirudh whispered, breaking the silence of the night.



SEVEN

Dressed in black robes, with his tall staff in his hand, Kalanayaka was walking through the jungle. The green leaves formed a porous roof above him, through which the bright yellow rays of the sun pierced and lit the forest floor. Dried leaves scrunched under his feet as he neared his destination, about 500 feet away. The sorcerer was returning to his hut.

A few weeks ago, he had received a message from his guru, telling him to go to Tamil Nadu. Kalanayaka had promptly obeyed. Since then, he had been staying in a jungle on the outskirts of Chennai. At present, he was returning home after eating his breakfast at a small food joint.

As he walked, he recalled an incident that had occurred in a forest similar to this some years ago, during his final year of sorcery training. It had been life-altering, and he remembered every small detail vividly. His mind went back to the scene.

Ajith rose early that morning and finished his chores. After breakfast, he headed to meet his guru for training. As he approached the teacher's hut, he saw that his mentor was not in the veranda, where he usually sat. When he reached the hut's entrance, he found that a note had been left in the window. It was in his guru's handwriting.

Meet me in the centre of the forest.

Ajith folded the note and looked at the forest ahead of him. He had heard some frightening stories about the strange beasts living in its dark depths, but he didn't know if the tales were true or not. So he

walked cautiously to the edge of the green expanse. Fear gripped his heart. What if the stories were true? He shook his anxiety off instantly, feeling foolish for believing such tales, and focused on meeting his guru. He took a deep breath and entered the forest. With slow steps, he walked through the eerie jungle.

Trees bordered the forest pathway, providing him shade from the scorching sun. He'd been walking for ten minutes along the path when he reached a clearing. The ground was free of undergrowth. At a distance was a large banyan tree. Under the tree, he saw his guru meditating. Dry leaves lay scattered around him. Ajith walked slowly to the banyan, trying his best to not disturb his teacher, and waited.

After a few moments, the teacher opened his eyes and looked at Ajith.

'I have been waiting for you,' he said softly.

His guru was then in his early fifties, his body still agile and strong. A long silver beard flowed down till his chest, and his eyes were serene black pools.

He motioned his student to sit opposite him. Ajith sat on the ground. Both of them were in saffron robes. His guru took a deep breath and closed his eyes. After a few moments, he turned his steady gaze towards Ajith.

'What I am about to tell you is very crucial.'

Then the teacher started telling him a story—a story that would stun Ajith.

'Many centuries ago, during the time of Krishna, Lord Vishnu's ninth avatar, our ancestors stumbled upon a great secret. A secret so significant for us that it was passed down generations! It was vital for us to preserve it and carry it into the future, where it could be used to our advantage ...'

Ajith nodded slowly, barely grasping all that his guru was saying. But he felt important. The joy of being privy to one of the best-kept secrets of all time was bubbling inside him. It reflected in his eyes. The student shifted excitedly in his seat, fidgeting with his thumbs. He took a deep breath and waited. He knew the teacher would take his time.

'A conspiracy was hatched by Lord Krishna himself in the company of Sage Dweepa, his trusted friend and confidante.'

Ajith nodded, his face serious. *A conspiracy by Lord Krishna?* He couldn't believe his ears!

'The conspiracy pertains to the Kalki avatar.'

Ajith's eyes widened—the very name had piqued his attention. But the guru continued.

'The world assumes Lord Vishnu will be known as Kalki in his last avatar. But that's not true. He will be given a different name.'

The news came as a shock to Ajith, and his mind raced. He couldn't figure out how his guruji and their cult even knew about this.

Guruji went on. 'What's more, Kalki won't be all-knowing, like he was in the Krishna avatar. He will be a common man.'

Ajith gulped. On the outside, he was calm. But his heart was pounding furiously. His temple was throbbing. His mind reeled.

'This is a weakness of Lord Vishnu's Kalki avatar. Probably his most major one! And we are going to exploit this.'

Ajith looked at his guru questioningly.

'If Kalki is not all-knowing, we can use this to our advantage and make our dream come true. The dream of controlling the world! Kalki will never be able to stop us. Before he even gets a hint of our plans, we would have executed them! We will set demons loose all over the world. And Kalki won't be able to do anything about it.'

His guru paused and then spoke in an uncharacteristically cold voice. 'Kalki, the Vanquisher of Evil, will be vanquished by evil. And once he is out of our way, no one can stop us from world domination.'

The teacher smiled as he relished the thought of a Kalki-free world. Ajith managed a weak smile; he wasn't aware of the plans yet, but his chest swelled with pride at being included in this grand cult and at being privy to this earth-shattering secret.

'Ajith, you are being trained to become a powerful sorcerer, so that you can aid us in establishing the rule of *our* lord on earth.'

Ajith nodded. He was ready.

The snapping of a twig brought Kalanayaka back to the present. He stopped moving and looked around, trying to identify the source of the sound. He was on his guard. He thought the breaking of a twig could be a natural occurrence, as he was in a jungle, but he couldn't risk dismissing it. It could be that some wild animal was on the prowl, or someone may be following

him. He bent low and looked around cautiously. Another twig snapped in the distance.

Kalanayaka realized the sound came from the trees ahead of him. He cautiously approached the grove and saw a sage foraging for fallen branches, picking them up from the ground and breaking them into smaller twigs. His eyes grew wide when the man's identity dawned on him.

Sage Dweepa!



EIGHT

The man wearing the overflowing red cloak walked to the tree in the centre of the clearing. Casting a cursory glance over a little cottage to his left, he looked at the man—the occupant of the cottage—meditating peacefully under the tree. He cleared his throat as he neared the tree. The man who was meditating opened his eyes in a flash and, seething with disgust and anger, looked for the source of the disturbance. But then his eyes widened in recognition and his face softened.

‘Apologies, *shishya*,’ the red-cloaked man spoke as he approached.

The disciple sprung from his seat and bowed to his lord, touching his feet. The lord patted his head, blessing him, and pulled him upright. He looked at his student closely. He was seeing him after ten years. Age had caught up with the man. His wrinkled skin, grey hair, shrivelled face—all bore testimony to that fact.

They sat in the shade of the tree. The student asked, ‘What can I get for you, my lord? Water, juice ... just name it ...’

The man shook his head. ‘I do not want anything. Thank you.’

He gave a brief smile, which remained veiled under the hood, and came straight to the point. ‘Jana, I have come to recruit your best students for the Kalabakshakas.’

For a moment Jana’s face lit up, but it fell just as quickly. ‘At the moment, I have ... um ... only—only one student worthy of becoming a Kalabakshaka.’

The lord kept his dark-skinned hand on the disciple's shoulder and squeezed it warmly. 'That's better than none. Even if it's just one student, I will gladly accept him ... *if* he is worthy of it. Who is this student? Where did you find him?'

'Do you recall that I recruited some children from a shelter home in Karnataka many years back?'

The man in the red cloak nodded.

'He is one of them ...' Jana revealed. 'It took some amount of convincing to bring him to our side, showing him our views and take on God. But now he is driven to vanquish Kalki. He is a power-hungry monster ...' The disciple proceeded to describe Ajith's conquests, including his sacrifice of the rooster.

'Where is he now?'

'He's on a quest for more power. I believe he is in Tamil Nadu.'

Under the red hood, the lord's eyes widened. 'Why Tamil Nadu?'

His chest puffing out with pride, Ajith's guru answered, 'My lord, twenty years have passed since the incident of the red lightning. When we met a few years back, you had mentioned that Dweepa and Kalki would meet any time after twenty years from that moment. I recall you mentioning that they would meet in the Tamil Sangam. Hence I instructed him to go to Tamil Nadu.'

The lord pursed his lips. If he was in Tamil Nadu already, it was necessary to find this student as soon as possible. *There is a chance he might ruin my plans*, he thought grimly.

'Though I must confess,' Jana continued, 'I don't recall you ever mentioning how you came to know that they would meet in Tamil Nadu ... How did you come by that information, my lord, if I may ask?'

'That's unimportant at the moment. What's his name, shishya, the student's?'

'Kalanayaka, my lord.'

The lord chuckled upon hearing the name, as it was used *only* for a Kalabakshaka. 'You really have a lot of faith in this student of yours, I see ...'

Guruji smiled and nodded.

'You gave him the name Kalanayaka?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'What's his birth name, Jana?'

‘Ajith, my lord.’

The red-robed man stood up. Placing his hand on the guru’s head, he said, ‘Close your eyes and think of Ajith. His face, his physical features ...’

The disciple did as asked. The lord, reading Jana’s thoughts, searched for the presence of such a person all over the earth. And after only a few moments, he found him! In fact, he entered Ajith’s mind and ... saw him fiercely attacking a man dressed in saffron robes! Dangling from that man’s neck was a locket shaped like a broken conch shell.

The red-cloaked man’s eyes widened with shock. *Just as I had feared!* He couldn’t let this happen. He took his hand off his disciple’s head and vanished into thin air, rushing to prevent Kalanayaka from killing Dweepa.



NINE

Dweepa, Kalki's ally! Kalki's *only* ally!

Kalanayaka recognized the saffron-robed man because of the broken conch-shell locket that hung from his neck. That locket seemed ordinary but it was very significant. Only one such locket existed in the whole world. And it was known to Kalanayaka that Sage Dweepa was the one who owned it. His guruji had told him so.

Kalanayaka couldn't believe that Dweepa was in front of him, for he was always known to remain hidden from the world ...

The sorcerer was pleasantly surprised to find him so close to his home. *Of all the places in the world, Dweepa had to turn up in the forests of Tamil Nadu, right in front of me!*

Kalanayaka sneered. 'If I eliminate Dweepa right now, then Kalki will not have any ally! Neutralizing Dweepa would equal neutralizing Kalki himself!'

With a grin on his face, he stepped out of his hiding place behind the trees and stood in front of Dweepa.

The sage looked at the man dressed in black robes. He was holding a tall wooden staff in one hand. Dweepa smiled politely at the stranger and was about to inquire about him, when Kalanayaka waved his staff and a strong gust of wind raged through the grove, knocking the sage off his feet.

'Dweepa!' Kalanayaka roared.

Dweepa fell a few feet away. The ground shook and the trees swayed with a malicious energy. He regained his balance and sat up on the ground,

the gentle smile wiped clean off his face. He looked at the man standing before him.

‘Who are you?’

‘I am Kalanayaka, the one who is going to kill you!’

Dweepa got to his feet, now certain that the man before him meant business.

Kalanayaka waved his staff once again. But Dweepa was ready this time. He raised his hand high above him and quickly brought it down, slicing the gust of air in front of him. With the crack of a whiplash, the sudden burst of air passed like a breeze along the sage’s sides. Kalanayaka was enraged; he prepared himself for another attack, but Dweepa didn’t wait. He summoned a streak of blazing fire and aimed it at his new enemy.

But the sorcerer was surprisingly quick in his movements. He ducked in the nick of time, and escaped unsinged. The ground under him was burnt, the leaves had turned to soot. He recovered in no time and immediately waved his staff, sending three successive streaks of wind at Dweepa.

The sage was waiting. He swiftly brought his palms together, aligning them next to each other, both facing Kalanayaka. Then he parted them, conjuring up an invisible wall. The trees shook from the force, and the wind around them howled. The wall vibrated with what seemed like bottled-up energy. Dweepa, his teeth gnashing under the strain and his muscles taut with pressure, held his hands firmly, trying with all his might to keep the wall steady against the onslaught from the sorcerer. And the attacks from the other side were successfully deflected!

With a slight smile of satisfaction, Dweepa bent his right arm and pulled it back, as far as he could, readying himself to deliver a punch. He curled his fingers to form a fist. With a loud grunt, he shot his arm forward and punched the invisible wall. The force hit Kalanayaka square in his chest, and he howled as he fell back from the impact.

Within moments, Kalanayaka got up and steadied himself, brushing the blood from his lip. He had underestimated Dweepa’s prowess. Meanwhile, the sage, having regained his composure, was mounting rapid attacks. He delivered punches to the sorcerer, hitting his abdomen, chest, legs and hands. Kalanayaka tried his best to defend himself, but he was feeling overwhelmed. The attacks were brute shots of energy, and he had to use all his strength to deflect them.

The fool is indeed powerful!

Now Kalanayaka closed his eyes and chanted rapidly. Bringing every ounce of his energy together, he gathered gusts of sand and hurled the forces towards the sage. Dweepa was quick to avert the sandstorm, but the wind was unforgiving and some of the sand particles and ash entered his eyes. Dweepa was blinded, the sand irritating his vision. Kalanayaka stood grinning as he watched Dweepa flail around.

What the sorcerer didn't notice was that the moment Dweepa shut his eyes, the red-cloaked man appeared behind him. And even before he could launch a fatal attack at the sage, Kalanayaka felt a body lunge at him from behind. Arms chained his torso, a crack echoed in his ears and darkness surrounded him. His eyes closed and his body went limp.

Kalanayaka lost consciousness.



TEN

Kalanayaka's attacker entered the chamber in his sanctuary flushed with anger. He slammed his hands down on the table, bending over it. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead. He shook his head and started taking slow, deep breaths.

'What happened, my lord?' a voice asked from behind him.

The red-cloaked man straightened and turned to the voice. The elderly man before him was dressed in a black cloak, but he wore no hood over his head. With greying hair and a fit body, the man stood with a serene expression on his face.

The red-cloaked man spoke. 'Bhairava, a grave error would have occurred today had I not intervened ...'

Kalaguru Bhairava looked at his lord while waiting for him to explain further. Though all that was visible of his lord was his dark and slender hands, Bhairava knew the face behind the hood. Still, his lord chose to keep it hidden at all times.

'Kalanayaka engaged Sage Dweepa in a duel today, with the intention to kill him.'

The red-cloaked man expected to see shock, but he was disappointed. All Bhairava did was widen his eyes. No words escaped his lips.

'I don't know who this Kalanayaka is, but is Sage Dweepa fine?' he asked.

'Kalanayaka is a new recruit among the Kalabakshakas. And yes, Dweepa is fine. Probably got a few scars,' the lord replied dryly.

‘What about Kalanayaka?’ Bhairava asked.

‘He is in the stone cellar, unconscious.’

‘What do you plan on doing with him? Execute him?’

The red-cloaked man shook his head. ‘He is an impressive fighter, Bhairava. With proper training, he could be a lethal weapon.’

Bhairava nodded. ‘My lord, how did Kalanayaka identify Dweepa?’

‘The same way I did,’ the man replied. ‘The broken conch-shell locket. Jana must have told him.’

The old man sighed. ‘But ... how did you know that Dweepa was under attack?’

‘I had gone to Jana for recruiting new students, and this Kalanayaka wasn’t at the gurukul. He had left in search of more power. Jana said he was in Tamil Nadu.’

Bhairava’s face hardened. He said gravely, ‘It’s about time, isn’t it?’

The man nodded. ‘Yes, Kalaguru Bhairava. It is indeed time. Dweepa is to meet Kalki.’

A tense silence followed. It was as if the wind itself had stopped blowing. The mood was pensive. Both of these men had waited a long time for this meeting, for they could identify Kalki only when he met Dweepa.

The silence was broken by the red-cloaked man. ‘I wanted to check that Kalanayaka wasn’t doing something that might ruin my plans! And when I traced him, he *was* attacking Dweepa ...’

‘It is indeed very fortunate that you stopped the duel. If you hadn’t, then we might have lost Dweepa.’

The red-cloaked man clenched his dark fists and spoke coldly, ‘Yes. I had to intervene, Bhairava! I have been waiting for the Kalki avatar since Krishna’s death ... I have waited centuries to vanquish Kalki. If all I wanted to do was kill Dweepa, I would have killed the one who was Krishna’s friend! But Dweepa is the *only* one who can lead me to Kalki; and I will not let *anyone* take him away from me till he has served this purpose!’

They fell silent again for a couple of minutes, wrapped up in their thoughts. Then Bhairava laughed softly. The red hood of the imposing man turned towards him ominously, as if seeking an explanation.

‘My lord, Krishna’s plan has such a big flaw. A fatal flaw that can cause his whole plot to be blown to smithereens—Sage Dweepa!’ He laughed again. ‘Dweepa is the biggest flaw! Dweepa is the *only* link to Kalki. And there he roams about, displaying the conch-shell locket openly. What a fool!’

Follow him, and you shall find Kalki. Then you can end both of them. You can strike before Kalki even has the time to realize his avatar's purpose.'

The man shook his head, slightly irritated at Bhairava's oversimplification. 'Don't talk like a fool, Bhairava.'

The old man, surprised, turned to look at his master.

'I know Krishna very well. He is one of the most brilliant beings I've ever met,' he said grudgingly, but there was a hint of admiration in his voice. 'I have known him up close and personal for a long time, you forget. And trust me when I say this, Krishna *always* does everything after careful consideration. He accounts for every single scenario imaginable, and *only* then does he formulate his plan. He is indeed a genius at strategy.'

But the old man wasn't prepared to hear a word against his theory. 'Then why didn't Krishna advise Dweepa to hide the locket? Why is the sage roaming around with that conch shell on full display? He can hide it or wear something else, can't he?'

A smile appeared under the red hood. 'Let's play with a hypothetical situation, Bhairava. You have made certain plans. Your enemy comes to know of these plans. What do you do next?'

Bhairava answered instantly, 'It is obvious. I will change those plans immediately.'

'Now consider this: You know that your enemy has discovered your plans, so your first response should be to change them immediately. But what if you don't? What if you let the plans be? You know that your enemy knows, but instead of changing those plans, you simply make more plans, just to compensate for the disadvantage that your enemy has you at, covering the contingencies. The enemy knows what you are planning to do and they expect you to change or drop your strategy. So you can proceed with your original plan as well as the additional plans for emergencies, and your enemy is left guessing what your new plans are.'

The man paused, allowing Bhairava to absorb the theory he had just presented. 'Well?'

Bhairava nodded slowly. 'Definitely thought-provoking, I must confess.'

The man smiled. 'And this is Krishna! If he hasn't changed his plan, he will have added more safeguards—something to improve on the original plan. To be honest, we don't even know all of Krishna's plans. Nor do we know what Kalki is capable of.'

Bhairava considered this.

The man in the red hood continued, partly talking to himself, 'But one thing's for certain: Krishna knew that our knowing a part of his plans won't cause a jot of damage to his entire scheme.'



ELEVEN

Rain was pelting down hard on the hut. But its occupants were well-protected from the elements outside. The trees gleamed liquid silver with every lightning flash. Small rivulets of rainwater made their way through the wet sands to unknown destinations.

‘Yes, Sage Dweepa, Dwarka will cease to exist. After my death, Dwarka will start crumbling, ultimately submerging under the sea,’ the dark-complexioned god was saying.

Dweepa was too shocked to speak. He gulped and stared at his lord, waiting for him to go on.

Krishna spoke. ‘You will see it with your own eyes. You will live to see it.’

Sage Dweepa pleaded, ‘My lord, I do not want to live through a time when your creation is destroyed. I do not want to see it, my lord. I do not!’ With moist eyes, Dweepa joined his palms and begged Krishna, who leaned forward and took the sage’s hands in his.

‘It is essential that you see the fate of Dwarka. It’s crucial as you will need to tell me about it in the Kali yuga. There’s a lesson to be learnt from it ...’

Dweepa nodded hesitantly. Krishna withdrew his hands and rested them on his thighs. The sage readied himself to write again.

Krishna took a deep breath, looked at Dweepa and spoke. ‘You should be alive, and that is of the essence, Sage Dweepa. You will be my only ally when I appear in my Kalki avatar. You will be the one to

guide me to my destiny. If anything happens to you, then the Kalki avatar will never manifest.’ Krishna paused.

‘After I die, go into hiding. Change your identity, hide in plain sight. Or hide in secret. It’s up to you. But be warned, you will be in mortal danger if anyone finds the link between you and Kalki.’

Dweepa nodded at this too.

‘You will be powerful enough to drive away any threats to your life. But if you find yourself facing death, call out to me for help. I will protect you, Sage Dweepa.’

The sage smiled and said with gratitude in his voice, ‘Thank you, my lord.’

Krishna waved away his thanks. ‘It’s the least I can do.’

The present-day Sage Dweepa stopped reading, and placed the palm leaves in his lap. He looked outside the window and saw that the sun was setting. It was time for his evening puja. He bundled the leaves together and put them back inside the secret wall closet.

The puja room in his new abode was similar to the one in his home in Dwarka. There were a few minor differences, but he had ensured that it remained the same, especially the place where the idol of Lord Krishna and the painting of his guru were enshrined. The hidden closet was the first thing that he had made after he’d moved into this house. The notes of his ancestor were the most valuable thing here. He bowed to the idol and the painting, and stepped out of his hut to collect flowers for his evening prayers.

It was an exceptionally pleasant evening. The breeze came in from the beach near his house, which was surrounded by dense foliage. It was a secluded area, so he didn’t get any visitors. That is why Dweepa had been surprised to run into the man in black robes after breakfast. He had been even more shocked when the man had turned out to be a sorcerer who wanted to kill him! The man had surely given it his best, but had eventually failed.

Dweepa set these thoughts aside and calmed himself. After completing his evening prayers, he sat outside his hut under a tree. He was recollecting what he had read in his ancestor’s notes today. The original Sage Dweepa was instructed by his lord to remain hidden. And Dweepa had done his best to ensure the same. Even his other ancestors had done the same. Being safe

was of the essence to him, and more so for Kalki. Dweepa's thoughts went back to the incident of the morning.

Kalanayaka!

That was what the sorcerer had called himself, Dweepa recalled. But no matter how much he thought, Dweepa couldn't find the answer to how Kalanayaka knew that he was the sage and where he would be.

Dweepa had come to Tamil Nadu because Krishna had advised his ancestor to do so. He had followed the instructions to a T. The sage walked to the only mirror hanging in his hut and looked at himself. He studied the raw wounds on his face and chest, then slowly, his eyes landed on the locket that swayed from his neck.

Kalanayaka did stumble upon me by chance, but he knew my identity by looking at the conch-shell locket!

Dweepa recalled that Kalanayaka's eyes had shown a tinge of surprise and satisfaction; just like a lion's eyes when it corners its prey unexpectedly and knows that the prey is helpless. Even so, Kalanayaka had been startled when his attacks were defended.

But what worried Dweepa the most was the man's disappearance.

Where did he vanish? Did he teleport?

The last question made Dweepa shudder. He knew there were some people who were learned in the art of teleportation, but as far as he was aware, they were all allies of Krishna ...

'And if Kalanayaka knows teleportation,' Dweepa inhaled slowly, 'then he isn't any ordinary sorcerer!'



TWELVE

Kalanayaka had regained consciousness. He was looking around, trying to figure out where he was. All he saw were walls of black stone.

A room made of stone?

The sorcerer recalled his last memories: Dweepa rendered helpless because of the sand; then a whooshing sound; strong arms grabbing him from behind; and finally, darkness.

It all happened so quickly! But how did I get here?

He realized he had been teleported by someone from the forest.

Teleported!

Kalanayaka swallowed hard. For a minute he couldn't breathe. This was too much to take in. He had read about the art of teleportation—a skill that was extremely difficult to master. Only a few knew how to do it. So he had a vague suspicion about who might have teleported him, based on what his guruji had told him years ago. But Kalanayaka wanted to confirm this guess, for he really couldn't believe that he had witnessed this. He closed his eyes in thought.

Kalanayaka realized he was still lying on the floor, flat on his stomach. From his position, he lifted his head and looked around the room once more. It was illuminated, faintly, by a light source above him. He rolled on to his back and looked up. In the ceiling was a one-foot-wide hole covered with steel bars, allowing sunlight to trickle into the room. The sorcerer got up and surveyed the bare room, which had nothing except the black stone walls and the shaft in the ceiling. He observed that one side of the stone

cellar led to a two-foot-wide, eight-foot-long passage. He saw light emanating from the other end, and realized that it opened into what seemed to be another room. He tried peering down the corridor, but what lay at the end of it was beyond his line of vision. So he carefully crossed the passageway and stepped into the other room.

Inside the second room, he turned right to locate the source of the faint yellow light. The sight he was greeted with was something he would never forget, for no other scene had ever instilled so much fear as well as excitement in him at the same time.

Yellow lanterns hung from the wall on the right, producing the dull glow. And even in the muted light, Kalanayaka had no trouble recognizing what was in front of him, or rather *who* was in front of him. Against the wall were silhouettes of a group of ten to fifteen men, dressed in long cloaks with hoods over their heads. They were standing erect, their hands behind their backs. Kalanayaka couldn't see their faces, but he felt all their eyes on him. And the most peculiar thing about their appearance was that a pair of horns protruded from each hood. The scene was chilling.

Had it not been for his guru, Kalanayaka wouldn't have had any clue about the identity of these people. Perhaps he would have passed out in alarm! Instead he found his heart brimming with nothing short of bliss. He felt lucky to be standing before them. For these were some of the most widely feared men in the world of sorcery. Legends said that they were in league with the demons themselves. They were so dangerous that no one dared cross them. And if anyone tried, it was that person's last act of bravery.

Indeed, standing before Kalanayaka were the supreme masters of sorcery—the legendary Kalabakshakas! The Devourers of Time!

The word stirred up the memory of the first time Kalanayaka had heard about them.

At the age of twenty-four, the young sorcerer was halfway through his training. One day, while taking a break, he asked, 'Guruji, who is the most powerful sorcerer in the world?'

'The Kalabakshakas, of course. The Devourers of Time,' Ajith's guru declared with a broad smile on his face. 'They are the answer to your question. They are not one but many ... And they are dangerous and shrewd.'

Ajith nodded slowly. ‘They must be really powerful to be feared so much. They must be invincible, right?’

The teacher shook his head and answered instantly, ‘They are indeed feared. But they aren’t completely invincible. There is only one person who’s stronger than the Kalabakshakas. He can single-handedly take them all on.’

Ajith’s guru thought for a moment and appeared a bit sheepish for he had spoken hastily in his excitement. He composed himself and added, ‘Actually ... there is indeed one person who can be called the most powerful sorcerer in the whole world. And not many know of his existence. His name is seldom taken for the power and fear he exudes. He is the leader of the Kalabakshakas—Kalarakshasa! The Demon of Time.

‘The Kalabakshakas always dress in long black cloaks, with hoods covering their heads,’ the teacher explained. ‘They wear a crown from which two bull horns protrude. Each Kalabakshaka also owns a staff. On the tip of the staff is a small skull with miniature bull horns on it.’

Ajith hungered to know more about these formidable sorcerers. ‘What about Kalarakshasa?’

The guru sighed. ‘Well ... Not many people get to see Kalarakshasa. He grants audience only to the Kalabakshakas. Rarely does he appear before any stranger.’

‘Where do these Kalabakshakas live? Where are they to be found?’

His teacher smiled. ‘Nobody knows, except for a select few. Only a Kalabakshaka can take you to where they live. But it is rumoured that they live in a stone house, or rather a stone palace.’

‘Guruji, how is it that you know so much about the Kalabakshakas?’

The guru smiled and looked at his shishya. ‘I’m glad you asked, Ajith. I know all this because I work for them. I recruit the best sorcerers for their cause. And you, my student, are learning sorcery to aid the Kalabakshakas in successfully achieving their mission of summoning the demons to freely roam the earth again!’

Ajith’s eyes widened; the air seemed to have gone out of him.

‘You know what the mission is, right?’ The master looked anxiously at Ajith.

‘The mission is to set the demons loose ... by taking advantage of the Kalki avatar’s weakness—of not being all-knowing as his Krishna

avatar was—and, of course, eliminate Kalki,’ the student recited.

His teacher exhaled in relief and smiled broadly. ‘You are absolutely right, my boy! It is essential that the soldier know the reason for fighting the battle. It motivates him, inspires him.’

After pondering for a couple of moments, Ajith asked, ‘Guruji, what is the significance of the word *kala*? I mean, all these names have “kala” in them ... Kalarakshasa, Kalabakshaka ... Why so?’

‘A good question, son. The word “kala” means “time”. And why the emphasis on time? Because time defines us or, should I say, *will* define us. The objective of the Kalabakshakas is to vanquish the Kalki avatar. And when they do, they will usher in a new age, devouring the current one. Hence, they are the Devourers of Time. Kalarakshasa is the Demon of Time. A name he chose for himself ...’

From that day, Ajith had never looked back. He’d travelled far along the path of sorcery and been christened Kalanayaka. And today, the path had brought him right to the stone palace of the Kalabakshakas!

Kalanayaka took a step forward and walked to the group standing in front of him. Suddenly, a voice boomed from behind him, ‘Kalanayaka!’

It wasn’t a cry. It wasn’t a warning. It was an announcement. The name seemed to explode around him. Kalanayaka turned to see who had called out to him, but saw no one.

‘Kalanayaka, welcome to the palace of the Kalabakshakas!’ the voice boomed again. Kalanayaka now noted that it came from above. He darted a look towards the ceiling.

A few feet above the stone wall in front of him was a balcony, and standing at its edge was a man wearing red silk robes with the customary hood over his head. Unlike the Kalabakshakas, he didn’t have any bull horns on his hood. Even though he was at a great height, Kalanayaka could make out his large frame based on his broad shoulders.

The eyes of the hooded man were fixed on Kalanayaka, as though scrutinizing him. From the balcony, he could see the entire hall sprawled in front of him. Finally, he slowly shifted his gaze to the group of Kalabakshakas. ‘I hereby declare Kalanayaka a Kalabakshaka.’

Kalanayaka was stunned. *Me, a Kalabakshaka? One of the most powerful sorcerers in the world ...!*

Slowly, he realized the meaning of the words, and his joy knew no bounds. His heart was racing with excitement and his hands trembled. A tingle ran down his back, and his body was covered in goosebumps.

The hooded figure's eyes moved from the Kalabakshakas to Kalanayaka, and then back to the group again. 'Take care of Kalanayaka, and show him to his place. He is one of you now.'

The figure in the red silk robes regarded Kalanayaka one final time and then walked away from the edge of the balcony, disappearing from view. Kalanayaka turned to the Kalabakshakas and watched them bow to the man retreating from the platform. Then they all turned to face him. One of them stepped forward and, gesturing him to enter the passage behind them, led the way.

Kalanayaka couldn't believe what had just happened! His feet were walking a slow shuffle, his heart was yet to calm down. But determined to show composure and not betray his ecstasy to his fellow Kalabakshakas, he took slow, conscious breaths.

He followed the silent Kalabakshaka to an airy room bathed in sunlight. It was furnished with beds, all of them empty at the moment. The room had many large windows. At the foot of every bed, Kalanayaka saw a large cane, on top of which was a skull with two bull horns. *The staff of the Kalabakshakas! So this is where the sorcerers rested!* Beside each bed was a small table with drawers to store the men's private possessions.

The hooded figure showed Kalanayaka to the bed at the end of the room. But there was no staff waiting for him. In a moment of panic, Kalanayaka suddenly realized that he had completely forgotten about his own staff! He'd had it while fighting Dweepa ... but where was it now? Had he dropped it in the chaos when he was transported to the stone palace? His head was full of questions.

The hooded Kalabakshaka interrupted his thoughts, startling him. 'You will be given your staff soon. Do not worry. You will receive it directly from our leader's hands.'

Kalanayaka felt relief wash over him. He nodded gratefully.

The Kalabakshaka bowed slightly and left to rejoin the others. As he walked back, Kalanayaka called out, 'Excuse me?'

The Kalabakshaka stopped and turned slowly, coldly. 'Yes?'

Kalanayaka took a step forward after a nervous gulp. 'Who was the man on top of the platform? The one in the red—'

The Kalabakshaka replied instantly, a strain of pride in his voice, ‘Why, he is the man who is going to give you your staff. Our leader—Kalarakshasa!’



THIRTEEN

Anirudh found himself inside the hut again, standing with his back to the corner. The lightning flashes gave an eerie look to the trees in the torrential rain, but his eyes were fixed on the two people deep in conversation.

‘Before I forget, here’s something for you ...’ Krishna spoke, bringing something out of the leather pouch hanging from his waistband.

It was a necklace.

The Dark-skinned One handed it to Dweepa, who accepted the gift by joining both his palms. The sage looked at the unusual necklace. It had thick black thread from which hung a strange locket—the spiralling bottom-half of a conch shell. Dweepa looked at his lord questioningly.

Krishna’s lips wore a smile as usual. And before the sage could ask anything, Krishna answered, ‘The top-half is with me ...’

Dweepa nodded.

‘Always keep this locket with you. Never lose it ... I will recognize you in my Kalki avatar by this locket. It will be proof of your identity. So you will need to pass this down to your descendants.’

Dweepa bowed, accepting the instruction and writing it down. Once he’d finished, Krishna added, ‘I have told you to remain in hiding, as you’ll remember. But to guide me, you will have to come to me.’

‘Yes, my lord.’ Dweepa listened to the god, his stone pencil taking down every word.

‘This means there will come a time when you will have to come out of hiding. For your safety and Kalki’s, I will keep our meeting place far from the place of my birth.’ Krishna was quiet for a minute, then he added, ‘Twenty years from the day I am born, we shall meet.’

Drawing a sharp breath, Dweepa wrote this down as well.

His lord continued. ‘Twenty years after Kalki takes birth, head to the territory of Tamilakam, the homeland of the Tamil people, towards the south. When the time comes, I will signal you regarding the meeting. You must then leave your hiding place and meet me where I tell you to.’

‘Of course, my lord!’ Dweepa agreed.

The scene shifted. Anirudh tossed and turned in bed, his mind bursting with images ...

Everything went dark.

Anirudh peered into the shadows around him. Slowly, a bright light, in the shape of a door, appeared ahead of him. As he walked towards it, he could hear the calming sound of waves approaching and retreating.

A beach?

Anirudh quickened his pace and stepped into the illuminated area. The blinding light surrounded him completely, dazzling his eyes. Anirudh squinted. Hot, grainy sand was scorching his feet. He realized he didn’t have any shoes on! Wincing, he dragged himself through the sand, desperately trying to identify where he was. His eyes gradually adjusted to the light, and Anirudh saw a blue horizon ahead. He was on a beach! Waves of frothy water came rushing to the shore, crashing playfully and running back into the massive expanse of water.

Anirudh smiled on seeing the ‘catch-me-if-you-can’ play of the waters with the sandy shore. He stopped walking and turned to check what lay behind him. Thick, rectangular slabs of rock, each around eight to ten feet tall, stood forming a wall. At the centre of this wall was a large gap, wide enough to let an elephant pass through. He

looked to his sides. Nothing, except for a never-ending expanse of sand.

He didn't have any clue to help him identify where he was. Sighing, he scanned the shore. He couldn't spot a soul besides himself. Anirudh reluctantly dragged his feet towards the sea. Questions flooded his mind: Where was he? How did he come here? *Why* was he here?

Anirudh kept walking, the sand scalding his feet. He was sweating profusely; it was getting hotter by the minute. Exhaling deeply, he brought his hand up to wipe his forehead. That's when he realized he was wearing a watch. The time on the dial was fifteen minutes past noon. That explained the scorching heat! His eyes now went to the date: the seventh. Which month? Which year? The sheer number of questions was making his head hurt.

He continued trudging across the sand, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched from behind. Instantly he straightened his drooping shoulders. But turning around, he found there was no one and nothing there besides the huge slabs. Anirudh was about to walk away, when a man stepped out from behind one of the walls and stood on the wide pathway.

Anirudh stopped breathing. He couldn't avert his eyes from the figure who was now briskly approaching him. The stranger was wearing saffron clothes and had a short black beard. His hair was tied in a knot on top of his head. He was middle-aged, and his body was muscular. Anirudh noticed he had a smile on his face.

'Recognize me?' the holy man asked.

Anirudh shook his head, curiosity brimming in his eyes. 'No ... I don't think I—'

He stopped abruptly. His eyes were caught by something he hadn't noticed before, something he'd seen in a dream just like this one. The locket hanging from the man's neck! It came to him in a flash: it was the necklace given to Dweepa by Krishna—the broken conch-shell locket!

'Sage Dwee ... Dweepa?' Anirudh asked.

The holy man nodded. He gestured towards his right with his hand, inviting Anirudh to follow with his eyes. Anirudh was astounded. The beach, which was completely empty just a few moments ago, was now filled with visitors! Stalls and vendors selling snacks stood in a line,

and balloons and toys were scattered all over the beach, among the excited beachgoers. In the distance, Anirudh saw a towering stone statue—it seemed to depict an old sage.

He walked closer to the figure. It was indeed a sage. In his left hand, he was clutching a bundle of palm leaves that ran down his side. His right hand was raised, his palm open, a gesture of benediction.

‘The statue of Thiruvalluvar ...’ Anirudh mumbled to himself, astonished. This sight was enough for him to recognize the location.

He was on Marina Beach!

Anirudh woke with a start, panting. The bed sheet was tangled underneath his damp back. *Two dreams! Two different dreams in the same night.* In the first one, he saw Lord Krishna advising Dweepa to move to south India exactly twenty years after Kalki’s birth. In the second, he’d met someone who seemed to have been the descendant of Dweepa, right here in Chennai, where he lived. And that too on Marina Beach!

‘What does all this mean?’ he whispered.

Anirudh sat up in bed. He went over the information again in his head: Krishna asked Dweepa to go to Tamil Nadu twenty years after the birth of the Kalki avatar ...

Suddenly he found himself unable to move. It was as if someone had turned him to stone.

‘*I am twenty!* If-if the dreams are true ... and I-I am Kalki ... then the sage m-must be in Tamil Nadu by now.’

Anirudh groaned, pushing the thought out of his head. The growing similarities between his dreams and his reality were scaring him now. It seemed he could no longer ignore the nightly visions. Frustrated, he looked outside the window. The silver moon gleamed in the inky night sky. Somehow the very sight of it filled his mind with momentary peace.

Anirudh ruffled his hair and gulped down some water. As he put the glass back on his bedside table, the calendar on the wall caught his eye. The page displayed a date that paralysed Anirudh:

7 May 2025

His mind raced back to his dream. He was at the beach, checking his watch, which, too, said it was the seventh! But as he stared at the calendar again,

his breathing heavy, Anirudh counted the number of days into his vacation. No, it couldn't be ... It wasn't the seventh after all! 'Then why is the calendar showing this date?' he whispered into the night.

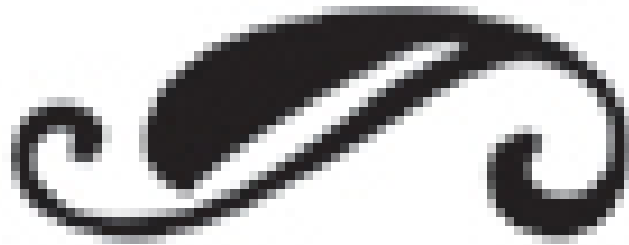
As if on cue, a breeze ruffled the leaves of the calendar, and Anirudh noticed that a few pages had curled up earlier. Sighing with relief, he saw that it was, in fact, 30 April. But goosebumps still pricked his skin. *A week to go.*

'What does this m-mean? Was the d-dream a forewarning? Will I m-meet this so-called Sage Dweepa on the seventh? *Is he even a real person?*'

Anirudh's head was throbbing. Still gaping at the calendar, he took a deep breath. The pain was getting unbearable, so he closed his eyes and lay back.

What if Sage Dweepa does exist? And ... what if I am indeed ... Kalki?

The thought sent a chill down his spine, even as a strange feeling of thrill coursed through his body. Exhausted from the dreams, Anirudh gradually slipped back into sleep, not knowing that his life—and the world—was on the brink of a momentous turn.



Miles away from Anirudh's house, in a hut on the outskirts of Chennai, the same holy man was fast asleep.

Dweepa was warm under the threadbare blanket. He was resting peacefully, unaware that only a dream now lay between him and his destiny.

It was pitch-dark. Dweepa looked all around him but he couldn't see anything. Suddenly, like a flash of lightning lighting up the dark sky on a stormy night, a blue ball of crackling light appeared in front of him. Stunned, Dweepa took a few steps back.

Just then, the blue ball sizzled and quickly expanded, growing huge—almost twice the size of the sage! Apprehension was taking over

Dweepa's mind and body, and he kept retreating. Now the ball, suspended in mid-air, became perfectly still and, after a small shudder, exploded.

Dweepa shielded his eyes with his hands as shafts of light pierced the darkness. He felt a wave of cool air rush past him, and then everything was still—except for the fragrance of sandalwood that lingered in the air. The sage was confused.

'Dweepa ...' a soft voice called out to him.

The voice was so mellifluous that it drained the fear from Dweepa's mind and body and instead filled it with peace and warmth. His mind calmed down, his heartbeat steadied. He lowered his hands to look at the person who had called his name.

Dweepa was overwhelmed. Now he felt foolish for not having guessed the reason behind the sudden burst of sandalwood in the air. For standing before him was a swarthy young man, wearing a golden crown adorned with jewels and a peacock feather, who flashed him a smile of childlike innocence. Dweepa fell at Krishna's feet and wept tears of joy.

'My lord!' Dweepa cried, prostrating himself. His lord's feet were soft like the petals of a lotus.

Krishna smiled and lifted Dweepa by his shoulders.

'I am indeed blessed to see you, my lord!' Dweepa joined his hands and bowed.

'Sage Dweepa, it's great to finally meet you.' Krishna wiped away Dweepa's tears with his slender, petal-like fingers.

The sage smiled broadly, unable to contain his happiness.

Krishna spoke. 'The time has come, my friend. The time for you to meet Kalki and bring him under your wing.'

Dweepa nodded, steadying himself, still wiping his wet cheeks.

Krishna continued. 'Exactly one week from today, you will meet Kalki on Marina Beach in Chennai, at noon.'

'Yes, my lord.'

Krishna beamed and patted Dweepa on the shoulder.

'But, my lord, how am I to identify him?'

Krishna slowly stepped back, still smiling. 'You have seen me. Now it won't be hard to identify Kalki.'

Saying this, Krishna waved his hand once and vanished into thin air.

Dweepa was jolted out of the dream. Sitting upright, he gasped for breath. He had just met his lord!

The sage joined his hands and bowed his head, thankful to his lord for blessing him with an audience. He tried to calm his thoughts, and lay down. But he was much too excited after what he'd just seen. He was going to meet Kalki! Finally! Exactly on this day next week, he would meet Kalki. But an uneasy thought crossed his mind ...

Would Kalki recognize him?



FOURTEEN

Dweepa eagerly woke up early that morning, at four o'clock. It was the day he was going to finally meet his lord in his current avatar. Of all the Sage Dweepas, he was the chosen one.

He hurriedly took his bath, performed his morning prayers and had his breakfast, comprising some fruit and nuts. Then, once again, he read the instructions given by Lord Krishna to his ancestor—the part explaining what was to be done after meeting the Kalki avatar. Once he was done going through the palm leaves, Dweepa packed a bag with all his meagre belongings. What he wrapped extra carefully was the idol of his lord, his ancestor's portrait and the palm-leaf bundle. Then, checking his hut one last time, he departed it. He caught a bus bound for Chennai from the nearby stop. Dweepa knew exactly where he was headed.

The bus slowly made its way through the green fields. Seated next to the window, Dweepa enjoyed the view of the lush expanse dancing in the breeze and vibrant in the sunlight. It warmed his senses and, leaning back in his seat, he closed his eyes. His mind drifted to the instructions he had read that morning. He imagined it all happening before his eyes ...

Krishna was sitting serenely, with his legs folded, on the cane cot. Outside, the wind was howling even as the heavy rain pelted down. The dark-skinned god scratched his chin, pondering over the question Dweepa had just asked.

‘What should I do after I meet you in your Kalki avatar?’

Finally Krishna said, ‘I may not be ready to believe it, but inside I will know that I am indeed Kalki. I will convey this fact to myself ... in some way. Probably the same way by which I communicate with my devotees—when my words are just for their ears.’

Dweepa looked up, perplexed.

Krishna continued. ‘When you meet me, it will confirm the fact of my real identity to me. I will believe that I am Kalki when I see you. And I will listen to you. However, it will be up to you, Sage, to convince me and bring me back to the place where Dwarka stood, back to my birthplace. It’s here that my first steps as Kalki will begin.’

Krishna paused. His eyes met Dweepa’s.

‘You may also have to convince my ... I mean Kalki’s ... parents to let me accompany you here.’ Krishna smiled his mischievous, all-knowing smile, then added, ‘Or ... wait, don’t worry about convincing the parents, Sage Dweepa. Leave it to me. I will simplify things for you. I will make it easy for you to persuade them ...’

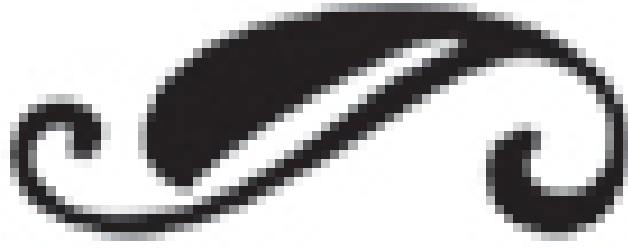
Dweepa bowed slightly. His lord worked in mysterious ways.

The bus jerked to a halt in front of Marina Beach, rousing Dweepa from his thoughts. He alighted from the bus and walked to the beach, buying a bottle of juice on his way. Dweepa studied the shore.

‘Marina,’ he muttered, looking at India’s longest beach, which stretched for over thirteen kilometres. His eyes halted at a one-kilometre stretch that was not frequented by visitors. Just a few people roamed around, while a few others sat in the shade.

Dweepa walked to the relatively empty stretch and sat under one of the many trees on the beach, a few feet from the blue waters. He had looked at the clock that hung in the juice shop. Only thirty minutes till noon. The sage settled down under the tree, relaxing in its cool shade and breathing in the salty breeze of the vast ocean in front of him.

He was here, and he couldn’t wait to finally meet his lord.



Anirudh was making his way through the swarm of students to reach the college gates and was closely followed by his friends. They had all come to collect their mark sheets and submit their preferences for the courses they wished to pursue in their final year of college. Having completed the formalities, they were heading out.

Outside the gate, Anirudh and his friends found a quiet spot.

‘So, what now?’ one asked.

Another followed, ‘Yeah, now that our vacations have started, what shall we do? We have two months of free time!’

After some discussion, Anirudh, who had been quiet all this while, proposed, ‘Shall we go to the beach?’

‘You want to go *now*? Isn’t it too hot? It’ll be even hotter by the time we get there.’

Anirudh shrugged. ‘We won’t feel the heat in the water. And if it does get too hot, we can sit under the shady trees. And anyway, if it becomes unbearable, we can always go back home.’

Everyone agreed, and so they started walking towards the beach, barely twenty minutes from the college.

Anirudh walked ahead, separate from the group. He was anxious. After all, today was the day he would meet the sage called Dweepa.

If such a sage exists, that is. If indeed I am Kalki. If at all the dreams were true ...

He had purposely suggested a trip to the beach, of course. He was curious to know, once and for all, the truth behind his dreams, for he could not ignore them any longer. So he had decided he would bring his friends along, so that he would not be alone ... in case he was disappointed.

Innumerable questions about his dreams and his reality ran around in Anirudh’s mind like rats in a dark granary. Yet his eagerness to know the

truth did not diminish. He walked slowly, not knowing what his future held, nor what any of this meant. After all, he wished to live the life of a common man—that was the life he knew—and not that of an all-knowing god! The prospect of such a huge responsibility, of being the preserver of millions of people ... it all seemed too much! Too much power, too much trouble. Yet, another little thought nagged at Anirudh. If he were indeed Kalki, the last avatar of Vishnu, he must have been chosen for a reason, right? What if that was his destiny?

Anirudh breathed deeply to clear his buzzing mind. He would have to wait to know the truth.

Having reached the gates to the beach, the group of friends entered. Anirudh checked his watch: five minutes to noon. Then, taking in the expanse of blue water, golden sands and green trees, he sighed and marched ahead. Picking up some bottles of cold drinks and a few packets of biscuits and chips, the group found a spot and sat down. Soon his friends went to swim in the cool waters, while Anirudh settled down under a tree with a cola. He looked at his watch again.

Noon.

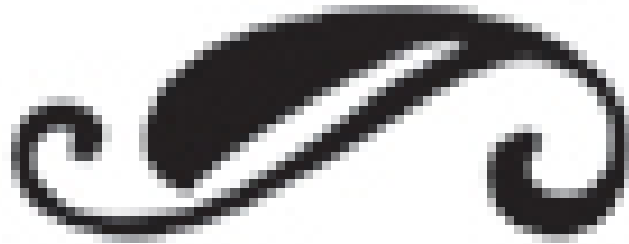
Anirudh's excitement knew no bounds. His heart was beating fast, and he started sweating. He could almost feel a ball of heat bubbling inside him because of his eagerness! By now, he was desperate to know if what he'd dreamt was true or just a fantasy created by his mind.

He looked at the long stretch of trees to his left. Just a few young couples in their shade, but no sign of a saffron-robed sage. Near the beach, kids were playing in the water, their parents following them, making sure they were out of harm's way. A few stalls stood scattered. Nothing interesting. But what caught Anirudh's attention was a long-bearded balloon seller lurking nearby. With a bandana shielding his head from the heat, the man was dressed in a full-sleeved white shirt and black pants. He also wore a pair of cheap sunglasses, and was dragging a cycle along the beach, with swaying bunches of balloons tied to the handles. He was waving to the kids and pointing the balloons out to them, trying to entice them. This amused Anirudh. He smiled, reminded of how he himself had pestered his parents to buy these as a child.

Anirudh now turned to the stretch on his right. Again, he saw no sign of a sage in long robes. Just a few people wandering about the beach, enjoying the cool water and the warm breeze. He sighed audibly and craned his neck

to see if there were any holy men behind the trees. None. He drank a sip of the soda and took a deep breath again.

So, was everything just a fantasy—a creation of my mind?



Dweepa started walking back to his spot under the tree. He had gone to throw the empty juice bottle into a dustbin some distance away. Looking up at the sky now, he saw that the sun was right above him. It was noon, he could tell.

The sage grinned excitedly as he walked back a bit faster. As soon as he approached the trees, a strong whiff of sandalwood filled his senses. He frantically started looking around. Immediately, his eyes found a boy sitting under the tree to his right. He was looking away from Dweepa, his eyes searching for something. The boy, dressed simply in a maroon T-shirt and jeans, had a certain calmness radiating from him. Dweepa composed himself; he had to be absolutely sure and could not afford to rush this meeting. The sage neared the tree to get a better look at the boy. He squinted to focus, and stood hypnotized.

There was no doubt the boy was Kalki—his lord. The face was just like the one in his dream: the deep-black eyes and sharp nose embossed on a dark-complexioned oval face ... and the petal-like pink lips, of course! The only difference, Dweepa noted, was the hair. While the figure in his dreams had wavy shoulder-length hair, the boy's hair was short, almost a crew cut. Other than that, the boy in front of him was nothing short of a replica of Lord Krishna!

Anirudh stopped searching to his right and looked down at the half-empty bottle in his hand. Suddenly, he got the feeling that someone was watching him. He whipped around to his left and was rendered speechless.

Standing before him was a smiling man in his late forties, clad in saffron robes. Hanging from his shoulder was an old black bag. The sage's face was

round, with a flat-tipped nose, puffy cheeks and a beard, and he had a wheatish complexion. His forehead was marked with a small red tika and his hair was tied in a bun on top of his head. To Anirudh, he looked like a typical Indian sage, except for the fact that his body was unusually fit. Another odd feature about him was the locket hanging from his necklace. The spiral half of a broken conch shell!



FIFTEEN

Anirudh's heart was racing. The man before him was none other than Sage Dweepa!

When the boy got to his feet and turned to him, Dweepa had to fight the surge of emotions. The boy's face was that of his lord's, and the dark eyes were intently looking at his own. Finally, they settled on his locket, and the sage knew the boy had recognized it.

'Sage Dweepa?'

Dweepa's pulse quickened. He nodded and bowed his head. 'My lord!'

Anirudh closed his eyes ... he was too dazed to believe this was really happening. Receiving the confirmation that the person in front of him was indeed Sage Dweepa was too much to process. For this confirmed everything. That his dreams were real. That he *was* Kalki! He felt the walls of reality closing in on him. It felt like a sharp knife was stuck in his throat, choking his windpipe, not letting him breathe. With a less-than-audible intake of breath, he brought himself back to the present moment.

'Please don't call me lord. Um ... I'm not one,' he said awkwardly, opening his eyes and bowing his head slightly. Then he smiled, embarrassed.

Dweepa looked at the mesmerizing smile. It was unmistakably his lord's smile!

An uncomfortable silence passed between them. Neither knew what to say.

Then Anirudh finally spoke. 'So, this is true? It's *all* true. You *do* exist.'

‘Yes, it is true.’ After a pause, the sage asked, ‘May I know your name, my lord?’

‘My name is Anirudh. And I told you, please do not call me your lord.’

Dweepa smiled softly and thought, *Anirudh, the unstoppable. Counted twice in the thousand names of Lord Vishnu. Aniruddhah ... He who cannot be obstructed, who is invincible against any enemy. A name befitting the person whose enemies now are much stronger than him. Anirudh is indeed Kalki, for no enemy of Kalki can ever defeat him. And Kalki himself will never stop in his quest to vanquish evil. The name Anirudh suits Kalki perfectly.*

Dweepa studied the boy standing in front of him. Though young, he seemed to have a certain air of maturity about him. ‘Okay, Anirudh. I will call you by your name.’

Anirudh nodded and looked towards the beach. His friends were still playing in the water, unaware of Dweepa’s presence.

Dweepa continued. ‘Though I would prefer to call you by your avatar’s name, I cannot because ...’

‘... Because my enemies should not know who I am. As they are stronger than ever,’ Anirudh finished without looking at Sage Dweepa, his eyes fixed on the sea.

Dweepa’s mouth fell open. ‘How did you—’

Once again he was cut off by Anirudh. ‘I dreamt about it. I also dreamt that on this date I was to meet you on this very beach. So I came here. I wanted to know if what I was seeing were just figments of my imagination or the truth. As it turns out ... it is the truth.’ Anirudh paused, turning to Dweepa. ‘I also dreamt that I was Lord Krishna ... and that I was talking about the Kalki avatar with Sage Dweepa. Dweepa ... He looked different, though.’

‘He was my ancestor,’ the sage answered.

Again there was that awkward silence.

Anirudh broke it. ‘Am I really *the* Kalki? Is this all a dream too? I ... I still can’t absorb the fact that this is happening. That this is true ...’

Dweepa nodded. ‘I can understand your doubts, Anirudh.’

He looked around. No one was in their vicinity.

‘Shall we sit?’

‘By all means, please,’ Anirudh replied, inviting Dweepa to sit under the tree beside him.

Seated, Dweepa opened his bag and brought out a scroll from it. It was an ancient article—browning at the edges—but looked quite well-kept. The secret of its preservation was, once again, Lord Krishna himself, who had blessed this heartfelt gesture, just as he had done with the palm leaves.

Dweepa held it in his hands as he spoke. ‘My ancestor, the one whom you saw talking to Lord Krishna, was a very good artist. He drew a portrait of Krishna during his leisure time. Since it was a likeness of our lord, it was passed down the generations and has been preserved carefully through the ages. It is valued as precious as your instructions to my ancestor.’

Dweepa handed the scroll to Anirudh. Feeling nervous, he looked at the sage and then at the scroll. Then he rolled it open and saw the image of Lord Krishna. The hair on the nape of his neck stood up.

Anirudh exhaled, tapping his finger restlessly on the scroll. He was filled with total disbelief. The man in the portrait looked just a bit older than him, but the resemblance between them was striking. Anirudh felt like he was looking at a portrait of his future self.

He stared at the scroll for what seemed like aeons and then, remembering where he was, returned it to Dweepa, who was keenly observing the boy’s face. Anirudh’s heartbeat, which had settled after they’d sat down, quickened once again.

‘I hope that you now believe the truth. You are indeed Kalki.’

Anirudh nodded, and said quietly, ‘I shouldn’t have been surprised ... I looked very similar to the Krishna in my dreams too. This image brought them back to mind. Yes, the portrait confirms that my dreams are true. That I was ... Krishna! It’s so hard to ... It’s too unreal to believe.’

‘Yes, the portrait is real, and it was made by my ancestor. This I swear on my lord. You were indeed him in your previous birth.’

Anirudh turned to look at the hurling waves, as if collecting his thoughts. His friends were still busy playing in the water, oblivious and carefree. Then he asked, ‘What now, Sage?’

‘We have to go to Gujarat.’

Anirudh faced his companion, his jaw dropping. ‘We?’

‘Yes, Anirudh. We. I have to take you to Dwarka, to start your education.’

‘*Education?* What ... education?’

‘If your enemies were to attack you at this very moment, you wouldn’t stand a chance against them. There is a reason why they are stronger. You

are not all-knowing, unlike your Krishna avatar. You have to learn things that your enemies are well-versed with. You have to learn a lot in order to face them, in order to defeat them! Some things I will teach you, some things others will and some you will learn on your own.'

Anirudh looked blank as he tried to absorb what Dweepa had just said.

'You will understand everything when the time comes, trust me. For now, understand this: We need to go to Gujarat. That's where your education will start.'

'I am ready,' Anirudh replied, suddenly resolute. 'But I don't know whether my parents will agree.'

'I wouldn't worry about that. I will come to your house tomorrow and talk to them. They will allow it.'

Anirudh stared at Sage Dweepa. 'How can you be so sure?'

'I am sure you have made some arrangements, as Lord Krishna, obviously.'

Anirudh gaped at Dweepa, but recovered quickly and asked, 'Where will you be till that time?'

'I will be here somewhere ... I will visit some temples.'

'And food? Where will you sleep?'

Dweepa patted Anirudh's shoulder. 'Don't worry about me. I will eat in a restaurant and sleep in a lodge. It's just a matter of one night. Tomorrow we shall leave for Gujarat.'

Anirudh smiled. 'You are very confident about us leaving for Gujarat.'

'I have faith in you. I'm sure things will work in our favour.'

'Um ... Sage Dweepa, do you have money for the hotel?'

Dweepa laughed. 'I have plenty of money, Anirudh. There's no need to worry about me.'

Anirudh studied Dweepa. He hadn't expected a sage to have *plenty* of money.

'Plenty of money? How?'

Dweepa simply answered, 'That's a story for another day.'

Anirudh smiled uncomfortably upon hearing his response. *What are you hiding, Sage Dweepa?* he wondered.

'See you tomorrow, Anirudh.' Dweepa got up to leave.

'See you.'

Before leaving, the sage took Anirudh's address. Both smiled at each other in parting, and then Dweepa walked towards the entrance of Marina

Beach. Anirudh sat chugging his warm, half-finished drink as he went over all that he had just learnt.

A few feet away from the boy, the balloon seller collected some coins from an excited child in exchange for a big red balloon. He had since moved closer to the trees. Casting a long look at Anirudh sitting under the tree, he mumbled, 'Kalki looks just like Krishna!'

Once his sale was done and the child and his parents walked away, Kalarakshasa strolled down the beach with his cycle of balloons.



SIXTEEN

As Kalarakshasa entered his chamber, Kalaguru Bhairava, who was reading on the couch, shut the text and kept it aside.

Kalarakshasa shrugged off his long-sleeved shirt, his swarthy body glistening in the dimly lit room. Then he wrapped his red cloak around his bulging biceps and muscular torso, and walked to the seat behind the desk. With one hand pulling the hood over his face, Kalarakshasa removed the sunglasses, the bandana and the fake beard with the other.

Bhairava went over to the desk, irritated. ‘I know what you look like! Why are you hiding your face from me? Why are you taking so much trouble to remove your bandana and beard from under this hood? You can be free in my presence at least, correct?’

Kalarakshasa laughed softly as he leaned back in his chair. ‘If I did as you say and someone entered this chamber unannounced, that person would see my face ... And I don’t want that to happen.’

Bhairava rolled his eyes and sat across from Kalarakshasa. ‘Did Dweepa meet Kalki?’

‘Yes, they met.’

Bhairava’s eyes widened, but he narrowed them instinctively. ‘I guess you didn’t kill Kalki?’

Kalarakshasa shook his head.

‘*What? Why?* You’ve waited all these millennia to kill him, haven’t you?’

‘He looks exactly like Krishna ...’

At this, Bhairava was shocked. He was at a loss for words.

Then, in a voice with thinly veiled malice, Kalarakshasa continued. ‘The moment I saw that he resembled Krishna, my intentions of killing him were washed away.’

Bhairava sighed. Stroking his chin, he asked the red-cloaked lord, ‘So, you do not plan on eliminating him?’

Kalarakshasa was quiet for a few moments. Then he spoke coldly. ‘I *do* plan on eliminating him, but *after* agonizing him ... He is just a young boy who has no idea about the world outside. I want him to see evil burn this world. I want to make him feel helpless, unable to save his precious little world. *Krishna’s grand plan!* I will rip it apart ... Once Kalki sees the havoc I will rain down on this earth, *then* I will kill him!’

‘What next?’ Bhairava asked.

‘Dweepa is taking Kalki to Dwarka to educate him.’

The old man’s brows shot up. ‘What education?’

Kalarakshasa shrugged and said, ‘I will keep an eye on them in Gujarat ...’ But he let his words hang in mid-air.

A long silence followed.

‘Kalaguru?’

‘Yes, my lord?’

Kalarakshasa started wringing his long fingers, looking straight into the old man’s eyes. ‘When I saw Kalki today, when I saw how closely he resembled Krishna, I wasn’t filled with pity ... I was reminded of the pain Krishna put me through. If I had killed Kalki today at the beach, I would have given him an easy death. I don’t want that—I want him to suffer ... suffer the same way that I have ...’

Kalaguru Bhairava considered the words. After a while, he got up and walked to the door of the chamber. Just as he was about to exit, he turned to the man in the red cloak and uttered what sounded like a warning. ‘Just make sure that you kill him before he kills you.’

Kalarakshasa lay back in his chair and closed his eyes, recalling Kalki’s face, which then brought to his mind Krishna’s, wearing that crown adorned with a peacock feather.



SEVENTEEN

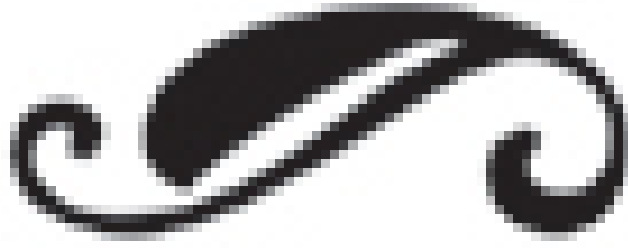
That afternoon, Dweepa set out in search of a modest lodge in the vicinity of the beach and booked a room for the night.

The small room wasn't grand, but comfortable enough for a simple man like Dweepa. It was furnished with the bare minimum: a bed adjacent to a window overlooking the street and a narrow closet next to it.

Sitting on the bed, Dweepa spent a long while thinking about the day's events, smiling at the memory of meeting his lord. After some time, he brought out a newspaper from his bag and started flipping through it. The sage was fluent in seven languages—English, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati and Sanskrit—and he enjoyed reading.

The day passed quickly, with simple meals at a roadside restaurant, evening prayers at a nearby temple, a short nap and a few hours spent roaming the streets and observing the hustle and bustle of the city. Once the sun set, Dweepa settled down to recite his nightly prayers, beseeching his lord with all his heart that everything should turn out fine the next day. Everything depended on Anirudh's parents allowing him to take the boy to Gujarat.

Clearing his mind of all doubts, Dweepa lay back in his bed and, in minutes, was fast asleep.



A few kilometres away, Anirudh and his parents sat down for dinner. Anirudh was unusually quiet today, his parents noticed, answering their questions only with nods. He was eager to retire to his room, and practically ran the moment his plate was clean.

He sat on the bed, trying to read a novel, but his head was bursting with thoughts. He was worried sick about the next day. *How on earth will I get my parents to allow me to go with Sage Dweepa? That too to a faraway place like Gujarat?*

He kept the book on his bedside table and, switching off the lamp, lay in bed. He looked at the sky through his bedroom window, lost in thought about what tomorrow held for him. His eyes shut eventually, and slowly sleep pulled him into its warm arms.

A room apart, Anirudh's parents were getting ready to settle down for the night. They were the early-to-bed, early-to-rise kind of people. Fiddling with the alarm clock apps on their phones, Mohini and Bhaskar exchanged idle banter. Soon they turned to either side and were in a deep sleep within moments. The house fell silent.

In the pitch-dark room, a voice was softly calling out to Bhaskar and Mohini. A male voice, telling them to wake up. They both awoke with a start and sat up, each confused that the other was awake too. They looked around worriedly to see if anyone else was in the now silent room, but found no one.

'What w-was th-that?' Bhaskar whispered, his eyes wide with surprise.

'I heard someone ... calling my name,' said Mohini.

Bhaskar turned to her in shock. 'I, too, heard someone! ... He was calling out *my* name. A man ... he had the sweetest voice.'

Mohini's jaw fell open. 'I heard him too! How is it poss—what ... what is happening?'

No sooner had the words left her mouth, than the room glowed a brilliant blue. They both sat paralysed.

An iridescent ball of blue light had appeared in front of their bed, which started expanding in size and then all of a sudden vanished. But where the ball of light had hung now stood a swarthy young man. The mild fragrance of sandalwood floated in the air.

Anirudh's parents were astonished to see a man appear out of thin air—let alone one who resembled their son so closely!

The dark-complexioned youth had a spellbinding smile on his face. His twinkling black eyes complemented his smooth oval face, framed by wavy, long hair that dropped to his shoulders. The man wore a yellow silk dhoti, and a silk shawl was wrapped around his upper body. A wooden flute was tucked into his waistband, and on his head sat the only proof Anirudh's parents needed of his identity. A glorious gold crown with a peacock feather in it!

Immediately they fell at his feet, their eyes moist with joy.

Krishna touched their heads and slowly pulled them up. They wiped away their tears and looked at the god adoringly, unable to contain their excitement.

Krishna began softly, 'Anirudh ...'

They looked at each other with narrowed eyes and then turned back to Krishna.

Bhaskar spoke. 'Anirudh, yes! ... You look similar to Anirudh! How ... my lord?'

Krishna flashed his mischievous smile. 'Anirudh is me.'

The parents stared quizzically at Krishna.

'It's true. Anirudh looks like me because Anirudh *is* me. He should, of course, for he is the reincarnation of the divine being Vishnu.' He laughed at the baffled expressions on the parents' faces as he spoke. 'He is the god's tenth avatar. The last avatar. He is Kalki! And it has been kept a secret from the world, from you, for his own safety, as well as yours.'

Bhaskar and Mohini were too bewildered to respond. They didn't even know how to respond to this fantastical turn their life had taken.

Krishna continued. ‘The reason why I am telling you this today is because it’s time for Anirudh to learn—to learn about the more significant things in the universe. He needs to gain knowledge and train to *become* Kalki in the truest sense. He needs to harness his potential.’

As they listened, Anirudh’s parents’ stunned expressions changed to that of alarm, followed by reluctance and finally, sadness.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Krishna softly. ‘To train him, one of my trusted devotees, Sage Dweepa, will come to your home tomorrow. He will take Anirudh to Gujarat, his—my—birth place. He will be trained there, near Dwarka. You need to let Anirudh go ...’

Mohini started crying—the sadness tore through her heart. A mother could never let her child go ... Anirudh was barely out of his teens—and to send him to Gujarat! She couldn’t bring herself to reconcile to the idea, even if he was a god, an avatar! He was still her only son.

Krishna understood their apprehension. He stepped forward and enveloped them in his warm embrace.

‘He will return soon,’ Krishna reassured them.

Stepping back, he saw that, though their faces showed hesitation, they were nodding. Krishna smiled.

‘Remember, I am always here for you. You need not worry about Anirudh. He will be safe, I promise you.’

The parents smiled weakly but, encouraged by the god’s word, they nodded wholeheartedly. Krishna’s voice was like a soothing balm to the wound of letting their son go.

‘Thank you. I shall now take your leave. Tomorrow, you must allow Sage Dweepa to take Anirudh with him. He’s my ally. And you can identify him by the broken conch-shell locket he wears around his neck.’

Krishna raised his palm and blessed the couple. His deep, sombre black eyes met their moist ones, and an understanding passed between them. With a sad smile, the dark-complexioned god vanished.

Bhaskar and Mohini were jolted awake by what they had just experienced. In the darkness, they speechlessly turned to one another. When each saw that the other’s face wore the same bittersweet expression, they embraced between quiet sobs.

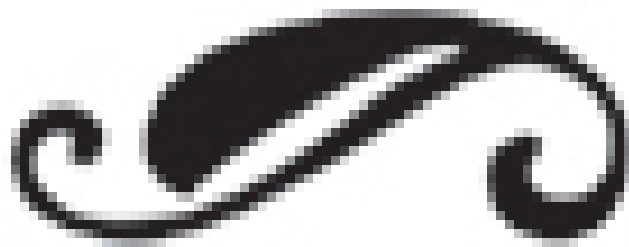
‘Was it truly Lord Krishna?’ Bhaskar asked.

Mohini nodded fervently.

Quietly they walked to Anirudh’s room and opened his door a crack. Moonlight was filtering into the room, illuminating his peaceful sleeping face. Knowing that he would be gone tomorrow, tears welled up in Mohini’s eyes again. Bhaskar squeezed her hand and shut the door.

‘The lord says he will be back soon. Don’t worry.’

Mohini buried her face in his chest as he guided her back to their bedroom.



Everyone in the living room was silent. Anirudh’s parents hadn’t told him about Lord Krishna visiting them in a dream the night before, lest it turned out to be just that—a reverie. Anirudh hadn’t told them about Dweepa either, for he wanted them to directly meet him.

The sage was sitting on a chair, while Anirudh’s parents were on the sofa adjacent to him. Anirudh stood in a corner. In the uncomfortable silence, Dweepa scanned the neat house, brightly lit by the noonday sunlight streaming in through a large window.

Finally, for lack of any questions, Dweepa turned to Anirudh’s parents. ‘I am Dweepa,’ he said anxiously.

Bhaskar shook his hand, introducing himself, Mohini and Anirudh, unaware that the two had already met.

Dweepa didn’t know what to say next. He decided to start with the truth. ‘Your son is not an ordinary person. He is Kalki, Lord Vishnu’s tenth avatar.’

Anirudh’s parents had noticed the conch-shell locket as soon as the sage had entered their house. They looked at each other quietly and nodded.

‘We know ... that he is the Kalki avatar,’ Bhaskar said.

Anirudh and Dweepa exchanged astonished looks.

‘Forgive me for asking, but how did you know that your son is Kalki?’ Dweepa asked.

Bhaskar smiled. ‘Lord Krishna came to us last night ... He told us you would be coming for our son. He told us the truth about Anirudh.’

Anirudh was stunned. Lord Krishna *had* found a way, just as the sage had said he would!

Dweepa felt partly relieved, but his job wasn’t done yet. ‘Anirudh needs to be trained so that he can defeat his enemies. He needs to gain the necessary knowledge so that he can fulfil the purpose of his Kalki avatar,’ he explained kindly.

Bhaskar nodded.

‘But to train him, I need to take him to Gujarat.’

‘Yes, we know that too,’ said Mohini in a low voice.

Even though Lord Krishna had promised them that he would keep their son safe, they couldn’t help their parental instincts—they were anxious about his well-being and safety. They remained silent while Dweepa waited for their response, their permission.

‘It’s hard for us to let our son go so far away,’ Bhaskar finally said.

Dweepa nodded, understanding their plight. ‘I know you are apprehensive about sending Anirudh with me. But I give you my word that I will take very good care of him. I will always keep him out of harm’s way.’

Anirudh’s parents looked at Dweepa and then at each other. Both the sage and Lord Krishna had guaranteed their son’s safety. They understood that Anirudh had to fulfil his purpose, and that they could not stand as an obstacle in the path of the Kalki avatar. They trusted Lord Krishna, and now, Sage Dweepa. They knew they had to let Anirudh go. It was his destiny—they’d come to terms with it the previous night. Bhaskar nodded to Mohini and she nodded back, tears streaming down her face.

‘You are right, Sage Dweepa. We are apprehensive about sending our son away with a person we’ve just met today,’ Anirudh’s father started.

Dweepa sat up straight. He didn’t like where the conversation was headed.

Bhaskar continued. ‘But we understand that Anirudh has to fulfil his destiny. We understand the need for him to train. So we will let him go with you to Gujarat. We are placing our trust entirely in you, Sage Dweepa.’

Anirudh exhaled with relief and Dweepa smiled gently, controlling his happiness. 'I shall keep your son safe. He is my responsibility. I won't break the trust you have placed in me.'

Bhaskar nodded and instructed a stunned Anirudh to pack his bags. Once he was out of the room, Dweepa and Anirudh's parents got talking. They discussed the previous night's dream in detail. The sage was indeed happy that his lord had made things easy for him. He beamed broadly, admiring the mysterious ways in which his lord worked.

By the time Anirudh returned, the three were chatting about his childhood. But now it was time to leave. Dweepa got up, his parents following suit.

At the door, Mohini hugged her son, sobbing quietly.

'I will back in two months, Mom,' he consoled her. 'Don't worry.'

She nodded through her tears. Then his father held him tight and tenderly patted his head.

'Yes, we will be back before Anirudh's college starts,' the sage added.

His parents nodded.

Bowing respectfully to Bhaskar and Mohini, Dweepa stepped outside. Anirudh waved goodbye and followed. With hearts heavier than lead, Anirudh's parents shut the door behind them.



On the train, now hurtling towards Gujarat, Anirudh was already missing his parents. But he fought hard to ignore the sadness. As Kalki, he knew he had a great responsibility, and that it had been right for him to come with Sage Dweepa, his guru.

It was a two-day trip, and during the journey, Dweepa paid for all the expenses. While Anirudh ate his meals from the train canteen, the sage only had fruit and milk. Anirudh was curious to know how he had so much

money, but he refrained from asking for he did not want to upset his teacher.

As they crossed station after station, Dweepa learnt about Anirudh's life and asked him about his hobbies and what he knew of Indian mythology. He was impressed by the extent Anirudh already knew. Anirudh, too, was itching to ask the sage many questions, but he saved them for a later, more private, setting. When there wasn't anything to say, Anirudh read a novel, while Dweepa studied a religious book.

At night, they slept comfortably under their blankets as the train chugged along, taking them closer to their destination.



EIGHTEEN

After a short walk through the woods, Dweepa and Anirudh stood before the former's house. Anirudh looked at the surroundings in awe. The hut, though secluded, somehow didn't appear isolated. It was enveloped in life and light. The sun showered its rays abundantly. Birds chirped, deer gambolled, leaves swayed in the cool breeze and a rivulet flowed steadily nearby, its waves softly thrashing against the banks. Anirudh felt like he was right in the lap of Mother Nature, and she was playing happily with all her creations.

Dweepa noticed Anirudh's awestruck face. 'Not a frequent sight in the city, huh?'

Anirudh shook his head. 'This Dwarka isn't the same as Lord Krishna's, correct?'

'The kingdom of Lord Krishna, his Dwarka, built by the chief architect of the gods, Vishwakarma, doesn't stand today. It submerged undersea after his death. This city is the modern-day Dwarka.'

Anirudh nodded.

'Technically, we aren't even in Dwarka city. We are on the outskirts, far from the city's noise.'

Anirudh smiled. He turned his attention to Dweepa's hut. It was small and painted sky-blue, with a red clay-tiled roof. The house was surrounded by trees, except for the large area in front that was carpeted in green grass, still wet with the morning dew. *Stunning*, he thought.

Dweepa unlocked the door and motioned Anirudh to enter. He observed that the house was charming on the inside too. The walls were painted in the soothing shade of sandalwood, and its faint scent lingered on the walls.

‘So, do you like your temporary home?’

Anirudh smiled. ‘I love it! It’s beautiful.’

He saw that the house was modestly furnished with a sofa, a chair, a table and a bed. To the right was a small room, empty. Dweepa followed Anirudh’s curious eyes to the room.

‘That’s the puja room. But all the contents of that room are in this bag.’ Dweepa patted the one hanging from his shoulder.

‘And that’s the bathroom, and here’s the kitchen. Make yourself at home, get comfortable. I’ll have a bath, unpack my things and ready the puja room while you freshen up,’ Dweepa said.

Half an hour later, Anirudh stepped out of the house and breathed in the crisp forest air. Looking up at the cloudless sky, he figured it was past noon ... and he was hungry. Still, the surrounding trees looked too inviting and he decided to take a short walk through the grove. Straying from the hut, he walked along a straight path in the shade, a smile fixed on his face. The breeze, whistling through the brown branches and lush green leaves, was soothing his mind. The woods were peaceful and quiet, except for the sounds of nature—the rustling of the leaves and the twittering of the birds. Anirudh strolled along, absorbing the beauty and bounty of nature, bathed in the golden hues of the sun.

He was mesmerized, more so by the distinctive trunks of the trees. Some of them were very old. Some had pieces of bark stripped and hanging loose, forming weird, accidental shapes. The trunks of other trees had their bark scraped off so precisely that the shapes looked like they had been inscribed with purpose. Anirudh spotted figures like a leaf, a conch shell, a bird and a circle on a few of these trees.

Anirudh was about to venture deeper into the woods, when he heard Dweepa call out his name. He turned and easily made his way back to the house for he’d been tracing his path. On his way, he heard Dweepa call his name a few more times, fervently. As he emerged from the foliage, he saw a tense-looking Dweepa searching for him. Spotting Anirudh come into view, he breathed a sigh of relief.

‘*Don’t* venture out alone again without informing me.’

Anirudh was surprised at Dweepa's stern reaction. 'I just went for a short walk,' he explained.

'Even if it's a short walk, I want you to inform me. Times are not good, Anirudh, especially for you and me.'

Anirudh looked quizzical.

'I will explain later,' Dweepa told him. 'Let's have some food first.'

After a simple meal of rice and dal that Dweepa had cooked, Anirudh rested on the sofa while the sage went to the puja room. He wanted to refresh his mind regarding the next course of action.

The sage took his ancestor's painting off the nail on the wall and opened the hidden compartment behind it. Flipping through the bundle of palm leaves, he thought about how Lord Krishna had indeed made things easy for him when he had gone to speak with Anirudh's parents. His lord had done just as he'd said he would. Dweepa also remembered what Anirudh's parents had said about Krishna visiting them in their dreams as well as the dreams the boy had been having, sometimes as the god himself. The sage recollected his lord's words to his ancestor, those that all his forefathers knew by heart ...

'I will convey this fact to myself ... in some way. Probably the same way by which I communicate with my devotees—when my words are just for their ears.'

For dreams were private! They could not be spied upon. His lord had a unique way of addressing his devotees secretly, and himself too. Dweepa smiled thinking about his lord's mysterious ways and started reading from where he had left off.

Krishna was sitting on the cot when Dweepa asked him, 'Why this place, Lord? Why should Kalki be brought back here?'

Krishna smiled. 'Because this is where I have been living my whole life. And this place will have a secret that I will need in my Kalki avatar.'

Dweepa nodded and wrote down the instructions. 'And what should be done after Kalki is brought to Dwarka, my lord?'

Krishna pondered over that question. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the brick wall behind him. After a while, he turned to Sage Dweepa and answered, 'Teach me Sanskrit, Sage Dweepa. And make me read the great epic of Mahabharata.'

Dweepa was perplexed. ‘*Teach you Sanskrit?*’ He was utterly confused because Sanskrit was a language known to all Brahmins. All students in the gurukul had to learn it.

Krishna explained, ‘Sage Dweepa, I can understand your confusion. I don’t need to learn Sanskrit. But Kalki will. During his era, Sanskrit will no longer be the language of communication, nor the language of learning. It won’t be important enough to be taught or considered a necessary education. So I won’t know Sanskrit. But as you know, to read the religious texts as they are, in their original form, one needs to know Sanskrit. So I want you to teach me the language after you bring me to Dwarka. Once I have mastered it, make me read the Mahabharata.’

‘And what’s the Mahabharata, my Lord?’ Dweepa asked, his brow furrowed.

Krishna grinned. ‘That’s a poem that Sage Vyasa will write in the future. It will describe, in great detail, the Great War of Kurukshetra and all the events preceding and succeeding it. It will also describe the lives of the Kuru princes. It is important that Kalki reads this account, as there are some things to be learnt from it ...’

Dweepa nodded, shivering slightly at the reference to the Great War. He had witnessed the battlefield of Kurukshetra almost thirty years ago, yet it took him a few minutes to remove the images of the bloodbath from his mind. He composed himself and quietly wrote down the lord’s words.

Dweepa looked up from the palm leaves and saw that outside the window, the sky was a luminous blue. White clouds floated dreamily. He sat considering what he had just read. His lord’s words were, once again, proven true. Sanskrit wasn’t important at all today. Schools didn’t focus on teaching it. Perhaps only one in ten taught the language.

‘Anirudh should be taught Sanskrit first,’ he muttered to himself.

Dweepa bundled up the leaves and kept them safely in the compartment, shutting the secret door and hanging the portrait on the nail. He bowed to the idol of Lord Krishna and his ancestor, and left the room. Outside, Anirudh was still fast asleep, tired after the long trip. The sage saw that the sun was about to set. He freshened up and went out to collect flowers for

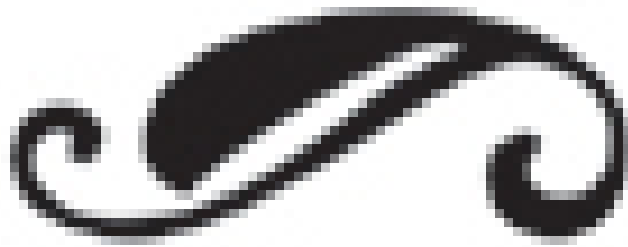
the evening puja. Anirudh only awoke when the sage had completed the rituals.

‘Slept well?’

Anirudh rubbed his eyes. ‘Yes ... The fragrance of sandalwood woke me. I really do love it.’

Dweepa smiled. ‘It has always been your favourite. In your Krishna avatar too, you liked it ... In fact, you used to smell of sandalwood. And if I may say so, the same is true for the Kalki avatar as well!’

Anirudh laughed, his eyes twinkling.



Dweepa and Anirudh were just outside the house, sitting on the wet green grass after dinner. Night had fallen. It was a beautiful and quiet night. It was as if nature was sleeping too, except for the cool evening breeze and the sound of crickets. The stars sparkled in the night sky, while the moon illuminated the forest canopy.

Just then, Anirudh remembered something. ‘You told me something about times not being good, especially for you and me ... What did you mean?’

‘Anirudh, you do know that your enemies are stronger than you, don’t you? In your Krishna avatar, you foresaw the threat that your enemies may try to vanquish you early on in this avatar. I think you may have been right.’

Anirudh waited for the sage to continue.

‘When I was in Tamil Nadu, I was attacked by a sorcerer.’

Anirudh’s mouth fell open. ‘A what?’

‘Yes, Anirudh. A sorcerer. I did not recognize him. I do not know him. But he seemed to know me, very well. Well enough to be bent on killing me. He would have been successful too, but I was saved somehow ... That sorcerer vanished quite suddenly.’

‘How did he know you “well enough”?’

Dweepa touched the locket. In fact, he clutched it tightly. ‘This locket is my identity.’

Anirudh smiled weakly. This was still all too new for him. ‘I’m glad you’re fine.’

‘Me too,’ Dweepa agreed, grinning.

‘Since you mentioned sorcerer, I take it you did not have an ordinary fight?’ Anirudh deduced.

Dweepa nodded. ‘Yes, it wasn’t a common fight. Magic was the weapon and shield.’

‘Wow!’ Anirudh exclaimed, awestruck.

‘You will learn it too.’

‘Me? *When?* Tomorrow?’ Anirudh asked excitedly.

‘No, not tomorrow,’ Sage Dweepa replied, laughing, ‘There is still time for you to get to that lesson.’

Anirudh sighed. ‘So what’s for tomorrow? What will I learn?’

Sage Dweepa tried to conceal a smile, knowing full well the reaction he was going to get. ‘Sanskrit.’

Anirudh stared at Dweepa with narrowed eyes, a little disappointed. The sage patted his shoulder and went on to explain what Krishna had told his ancestor about the need for learning the ancient language. After he finished, Dweepa suggested that they sleep, for they had to wake up early the next morning.

Anirudh looked up at the night sky one last time for the day before going back inside the house, trying to take in the expanse—as well as his new life. He couldn’t decide whether he was happy or sad, for it was all too much for him to process, even after the thorough discussions with the sage. He shut his eyes and inhaled the fresh air.

Everything in its own time, he thought as he went inside.



NINETEEN

Kalanayaka was being taken very good care of by his new family. His stay with the Kalabakshakas was not just comfortable, but also enlightening. A key source of his delight was the large and exhaustive library at the stone palace.

Kalanayaka liked to spend most of his time surrounded by the tall bookshelves, in which the spines were neatly arranged based on the subject. The library had a variety of books on many topics, especially sorcery and black magic, but also Indian mythology, religion and more.

He sat at one of the reading desks daily, poring over the texts on black magic and quenching his thirst to learn more and more about it. He even studied a couple of new complex sacrifice rituals to help him attain more power and aid him in accomplishing his mission.

Apart from the library, the spacious practice hall was another attraction. Huge stone pillars held up its roof. There were many tools for training in this hall: long poles for climbing, dummy models for target practice, exercise equipment for enhancing physique and building stamina. It was here that the Kalabakshakas practised and honed their art of warfare.

The Kalabakshakas fought in a more efficient manner than Kalanayaka did, he learnt. They were aggressive yet defensive at the same time. They blocked the attacks with one hand, while with the other they unleashed counter-attacks. Kalanayaka watched them practise in awe. He was amazed by their skill.

‘The Kalabakshakas are the most powerful sorcerers in the whole world.’ Kalanayaka recalled his guruji’s words, realizing the truth in them. The Kalabakshakas were indeed the most formidable sorcerers on earth. They were many classes above ordinary sorcerers! If Kalanayaka were to ever get into a fight with a Kalabakshaka, he wouldn’t last for more than five seconds, he knew ... such was their power.

Now formally a Kalabakshaka himself, Kalanayaka was also invited to the practice arena to hone his skills. He was only too happy to learn the Kalabakshakas’ ways. After all, they inspired him, for they considered fighting to be an art form. Thus, they practised every day. Their moves were few, but very fluid and precise. It was no wonder then that one attack by them had the potency of ten attacks by Kalanayaka.

The sorcerous warfare of the Kalabakshakas, Kalanayaka discovered, was more focused on defence rather than offence. A Kalabakshaka first made sure his defence was strong, only then did he go on the offence. Kalanayaka also learnt this approach. He started by trying to grasp the various moves by which one could defend oneself. Once he was sure of this, he was tested: a group of Kalabakshakas attacked him, and he fought them off well. Though he faltered sometimes, the Kalabakshakas appreciated his hard work. They assured him that he just needed more practice and that soon he would be a master in the art of defence.

Next, Kalanayaka was taught the art of offence. For him, this was easier than defending himself as it suited his personality. But the difficulty he faced here was mastering the movements. Each attack pose had a certain grace and calmness when the Kalabakshakas performed it. But when the same stance was performed by Kalanayaka, it displayed force and chaos. To destroy a particular target, the Kalabakshakas used just one fluid move, while Kalanayaka used up to three aggressive moves to do the same.

‘You are using too much energy.’

‘You’re not using your energy wisely.’

‘You are misdirecting the power of your attack.’

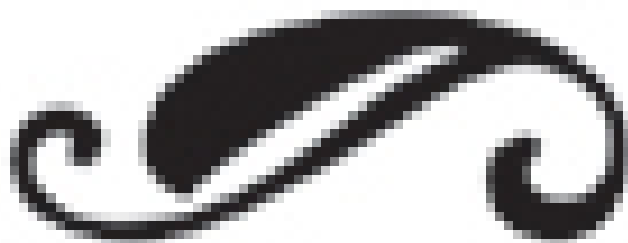
Though frustrated by the comments that came his way, Kalanayaka felt they were right. But he wished they would offer some constructive criticism. This wasn’t really getting him anywhere. For some reason, he just couldn’t bring fluidity to his attacks.

Then one day, a fellow Kalabakshaka offered him a valuable tip.

‘Be calm when you are attacking. Don’t fill your mind with hatred or any negative emotion. They tend to make you physical and violent. Just still your mind; bring your body under your control. And only when you feel it will follow your command, take your time to build up the energy for your attack, start your movement gracefully and end it gracefully. Remember this. It’s very important to *end* your attack gracefully too. For only when your whole movement is graceful, will your attack be truly destructive.’

This tip opened Kalanayaka’s eyes. After learning to control his mind and body, he could finally bring the desired fluidity to his movements. And with fluidity, indeed came destruction.

Having practised day and night, Kalanayaka’s warfare skills had improved greatly. He could now attack and defend at the same time! The Kalabakshakas were delighted. He had proven that he was truly worthy of being one of them.



Kalanayaka was sitting at the long table in the dining hall with his fellow Kalabakshakas. The hall had large windows through which sunlight poured in during the day and moonlight drizzled in at night. Next to each window was a torch bracket, which in this day and age held electric bulbs. From the ceiling hung a magnificent chandelier. At one end of the table was a golden chair decorated with rubies and blue sapphires and upholstered with red velvet. Upon inquiring during his early days, Kalanayaka had found out that he had surmised correctly. It was the throne of Kalarakshasa.

Ever since he had come to the stone palace, Kalanayaka had seen Kalarakshasa only twice. The first time was the day he had been brought here. And the second was three days later, when Kalarakshasa had given him his Kalabakshaka staff. Kalarakshasa had done so without uttering a word; he’d just given a nod to acknowledge the new recruit.

Kalanayaka's staff had a miniature bull's skull on a sturdy wooden stick. The skull was painted black, and its hollow eye sockets were studded with red stones. Kalanayaka had been practising with the staff for over a month now. He could feel it was many times more powerful than his old staff.

As Kalanayaka and his companions sat eating dinner, prepared by those among them with great culinary skills, a fellow Kalabakshaka came running to the hall. He stopped at the table, panting. Someone offered him a glass of water, which the tired sorcerer gulped down. The others waited as he took a few deep breaths.

Then he began excitedly, 'I just received a message from Kalarakshasa. I shall read it out loud.'

Everyone became alert. Their eyes were fixed on the Kalabakshaka. The message was of just one line, and delivered in a rush. The messenger departed soon after, but Kalanayaka's heart was still pounding. Every Kalabakshaka was stirred up; dinner was the last thing on their minds now.

The group hurriedly exited the dinner hall. Kalanayaka knew what was going to happen next. Rigorous training would commence, sorcerers would be recruited in large numbers. They would research the depths of sorcery and black magic even more extensively. The moment they had all been patiently waiting for had finally arrived!

The very next day, the Kalabakshakas began work with full fervour, such was the effect of the message sent by the Kalarakshasa:

'Kalki and Sage Dweepa have met.'



TWENTY

For Anirudh, Sanskrit wasn't such a tough thing to learn as he already had a base to build on, thanks to his early lessons in the subject in secondary school. Even so, he requested Dweepa to start from the very beginning and help him brush up on the basics.

Dweepa was a very good teacher in Anirudh's opinion. He had a brilliant command over Sanskrit, as he was taught the language right from his childhood. The sage frequently read Sanskrit texts, and so he never lost touch with the language. But that wasn't the case with Anirudh. He began by revising the alphabet and writing it down every day. Soon Anirudh was reading and forming words. Though he had to rebuild his vocabulary, he applied himself to his lessons diligently, paying attention to instructions from Dweepa, who was now only speaking to him in Sanskrit to help him learn faster. It wasn't long before Anirudh could follow and form simple sentences, and he would even try reading more complex words and phrases.

In just a couple of weeks, a whole new world had opened up for Anirudh. He had started conversing with the sage in Sanskrit! At first, his speech was horribly garbled and full of grammatical errors, with him invariably breaking off to use an English or Hindi word as he struggled to convey his thoughts. But as he continued to persevere with both speaking and writing, Anirudh's command improved greatly. Seeing how far Anirudh had come in a short span of time, Dweepa finally started testing him with questions that he answered correctly.

And so Anirudh was then given a few extracts from religious texts to read and rewrite in his own words. He was even told to write, in Sanskrit, his thoughts about the contents of the paragraphs he had read. Thus Anirudh achieved moderate fluency in the language.

One evening, after their prayers, Dweepa and Anirudh were lying outside on the cool ground, enjoying the starry sky. Lately, Anirudh had started feeling a certain calmness about himself; he felt as if he were living the dream of achieving the eternal peace that the world's greatest philosophies spoke about. He had stopped questioning the situation in his life; the doubts were melting away and giving way to a sense of purpose. He felt like he was meant to be where he was, like he was indeed doing what he was supposed to do and becoming who he was meant to be.

The star-spangled sky was reflected in his dark, serene eyes. Suddenly he remembered something he had been wanting to ask Dweepa for a long time. 'Sage Dweepa,' Anirudh spoke, 'I saw your ancestor taking down the instructions I—Krishna was giving. Do you still have those notes?'

Dweepa, who had been admiring the quiet night, looked at Anirudh, intrigued. 'Yes, why do you ask?'

Anirudh replied, 'I just wanted to see them. May I?'

With a slight bow, Dweepa went inside the house and brought out the notes from the puja room. He gave the bound palm leaves to Anirudh, who carefully placed the bundle on his lap and untied them. Dweepa had turned on the light bulb on the veranda so that Anirudh could pore over the scripture with ease.

Anirudh ran his fingers over the illuminated palm leaf at the top, caressing it. The bundle looked intact. 'These notes have been preserved very well,' he said, astonished.

'Yes, they have. Thanks to Lord Krishna, for he enchanted these leaves so they could stand the test of time,' the sage replied. 'Dictated by the Krishna avatar, and now being read by the Kalki avatar!'

Smiling, Anirudh read out two–three palm leaves to Dweepa and asked him if he had made any mistakes. The sage was pleased to see how fluent Anirudh's Sanskrit had become.

After some time, Anirudh neatly tied the leaves together and returned the notes to Dweepa. Turning to Anirudh, Dweepa asked, 'You told me that you saw my ancestor taking down the notes. Where did you see this?'

'In my dreams, of course,' Anirudh replied.

‘Oh yes ... your dreams! I forgot.’ Dweepa sighed.

‘Why? Is something wrong, Sage?’

Dweepa shook his head. ‘No, Anirudh, nothing is wrong. I know that you communicate with your devotees and even yourself through dreams. Through them,’ he continued, ‘you tell yourself about your past as well as other important points that may be useful to you.’

Anirudh looked absently at the cloudless sky while his mind absorbed the meaning and the role of dreams in his life. The cool night breeze gently rocked the leaves of the nearby trees and, deep in thought, he closed his eyes.

Anirudh found himself staring into an unending blackness, a dark void all around him. Slowly, brightness started illuminating his surroundings. He could hear the sound of water lapping against something as the scene started to unfold.

He saw a man reclining on a large bed. His face was strikingly similar to that of Anirudh’s. His skin was dark like the night sky, and on his head was a golden crown. The bed he was lying on was surrounded by water gushing from all the sides, as if he were in the middle of an endless white ocean.

The foamy water steadily thrashed the bed, which looked rather strange to Anirudh—it seemed to be made of some animal’s hide, a snake’s perhaps. Anirudh now returned his attention to the man’s sleeping face and, to his shock, saw a many-headed serpent towering over them. In fear, Anirudh took a couple of steps back. He studied the man on the bed, anxious to see if he was aware of the danger hovering above his head. But, to his surprise, the man was lying comfortably and at peace, as though he knew the snake wasn’t a threat at all.

Anirudh gulped down his fear and observed the man closely this time. He couldn’t believe his eyes—the figure had four arms! In the upper right hand was a circular yellow disc, while in the upper left he held a conch shell. His head was resting on his lower right arm, and the lower left arm was placed on his thigh.

Anirudh sucked in a sharp breath as he finally recognized where he was and who was sleeping in front of him! The snake bed, the ocean all around him, his doppelganger—all signs pointed to one thing only. Anirudh realized that he was in Vaikuntha, and that the man before

him was none other than Lord Vishnu! The snake in question was Shesha Naga, also known as Ananta Shesha!

Looking around, Anirudh found no one else. Then, piercing the silence, the sound of jingling anklets approached him. He turned to look for the source of the sound. To his left, from beyond the mists of the ocean, he saw a woman walking towards Lord Vishnu.

The woman was dazzling. Fair-skinned and sharp-featured, she was draped in a gorgeous green saree embedded with gems that shone like stars. The greenest of leaves adorned her head like a laurel wreath, complementing her silky black hair, which flowed down her back. A few strands played in the breeze. Her face glowed with celestial beauty and her smile was mesmerizing, while her deep-blue eyes conveyed serenity. Noting the way she carried herself as well as the aura surrounding her, Anirudh instantly realized that she was a goddess.

As she neared the snake bed, Vishnu got up and welcomed her. It seemed he had been awakened by the sound of her anklets. He bowed to her, and she reciprocated the gesture.

‘Bhoomidevi! Welcome to my humble abode.’ He spoke in a mellifluous voice. ‘Please take a seat.’

Vishnu motioned her to sit on his bed. She smiled and sat down beside him.

‘What brings the goddess of earth here?’ the lord asked.

Bhoomidevi laughed softly and looked into Vishnu’s dark eyes. She admired his handsome features and mischievous grin. ‘Can’t I come visit my husband?’

Lord Vishnu blushed at the question. ‘Of course you can, Devi.’

After a few moments, the shy smile on the goddess’s face faded and was replaced by great sadness. ‘Kali yuga has started, my lord,’ she said.

Vishnu smiled and took her hand. He brushed it softly and spoke in a reassuring tone, ‘I know what Kali yuga has in store for you. I know what mankind will do to you. But remember this, my devi—when man crosses the threshold of your tolerance and my patience, I shall come to save you. I shall take birth on earth as Kalki, and I shall avenge you. When the time comes, I shall destroy man *and* earth. That’s the mission of the Kalki avatar—you know, don’t you?’

Bhoomidevi nodded, some colour returning to her face. She gripped Vishnu's hand tightly. 'I know you will avenge me. You always have, even in your past avatars.'

Vishnu replied, 'And I always will.'

Bhoomidevi got up from the bed and Lord Vishnu followed suit. 'It's time for me to return to earth,' she said reluctantly.

Vishnu embraced her and looked into her blue eyes. 'I am always here for you. And you can always come meet me whenever your heart desires.' He brought her face closer and softly brushed his lips against her forehead. Bhoomidevi closed her eyes. She felt her husband's eternal love in the kiss.

When Vishnu finally let go of her, Bhoomidevi stepped back and started walking away. She turned to face her lord again, hesitant to leave. Vishnu smiled. And that smile wiped her fears away and dried up her tears. It was a smile that silently assured her that he would always be with her. That all would be well.

Bhoomidevi smiled too, weakly, and turned away. She slowly walked forward, but suddenly stopped. She faced Vishnu, a frown on her face. 'My lord?'

'Yes, Devi?'

'You told me you will destroy man as well as earth, that it's your mission to do so ...'

'Yes, I did say that.'

Bhoomidevi looked questioningly at her lord. 'You, Lord Vishnu, are the protector of the universe. And your Kalki avatar is the destroyer of the universe. What turns the protector into the destroyer?'



TWENTY-ONE

Dweepa sat on the green grass, scratching his beard and bathing in the warm sunlight. Anirudh, just a few feet away from him, was weightlifting a large stone. He liked to remain in shape no matter where he was.

Outside the house, they were taking a break from Anirudh's studies. He had just finished telling Dweepa about his dream from the previous night, in which Bhoomidevi had come to visit Vishnu in Vaikuntha.

'Firstly, what you described cannot be Vaikuntha,' said the sage, turning to Anirudh.

Anirudh looked up at Dweepa, surprised.

'It's Ksheera Sagar.'

Anirudh nodded, acknowledging his mistake.

Dweepa added with a chuckle, 'Nobody has seen Vaikuntha.'

Anirudh smiled, setting the stone down and catching his breath before the next set of lifts.

Dweepa continued, 'Now, let's go back to the dream. We know you have such dreams because you are trying to communicate with yourself. But ... I can't spot anything important enough in the dream that you would have wished to tell yourself.'

'Could it be that Bhoomidevi is Lord Vishnu's wife?'

Dweepa shook his head. 'No. You already knew that, right? Why tell yourself things you already know?'

Anirudh shrugged his shoulders. ‘Er, no ... I didn’t know that she is his wife.’

Sage Dweepa was surprised. ‘You didn’t know that Bhoomidevi is your wife?’

Feeling embarrassed, Anirudh shifted on his feet. ‘My w-wife? She ... she isn’t my wife!’ Anirudh protested, feeling a blush come on.

Dweepa laughed softly. ‘You are Lord Vishnu. You saw that in the dream, right? So Bhoomidevi is *your* wife.’

Anirudh sighed.

‘I thought you’ve read a lot of stories and knew much about mythology. I assumed you knew this too.’

Anirudh sighed again and mumbled, ‘She is Lord Vishnu’s wife! But I am Kalki. I-I am Anirudh! And yes, I have read a lot on Indian mythology, but I haven’t come across this piece of information ...’

‘If letting you know that Bhoomidevi is indeed your wife—sorry, *Lord Vishnu*’s wife was the purpose of the dream,’ Dweepa said, correcting himself, ‘then I think the reason for this is to assure you that Bhoomidevi is always with you. You can trust her.’

Anirudh looked puzzled.

Shrugging his shoulders, Dweepa added, ‘That’s the only possible explanation I can come up with ...’

That afternoon, after lunch, Dweepa handed Anirudh the Mahabharata. He kept checking whether Anirudh was reading the words properly and pronouncing them correctly.

‘Why do you want me to read the epic?’ Anirudh asked Dweepa.

Dweepa answered, ‘The Great War is one of the most important events in the life of your Krishna avatar. It would be immensely beneficial for you to familiarize yourself with the entire, and detailed, account.’ With a smile, he added, ‘Plus you, as Krishna, instructed my ancestor to make you read the epic—all eighteen books of it. Lord Krishna believed you needed to learn something from it.’

Anirudh smiled back and resumed studying the epic.

Every afternoon, after he’d read a bit of the Mahabharata, Dweepa would tell Anirudh to meditate. On most days, the sage made Anirudh meditate at least four times. He told Anirudh to recite the word ‘om’ in his mind and try to dull his surroundings. Anirudh’s objective was to block out all ambient sounds, his immediate reality, in order to enter a state of complete silence.

Initially, Anirudh had found this difficult to do. But with some tips from the sage, he was finally able to achieve this goal. Now he could slip into total silence at will and found his mind in a state of tranquillity.

Once he had mastered this technique, Dweepa told him to do the opposite! He instructed Anirudh to focus on each and every sound in his surroundings.

Though Anirudh found this very illogical, he knew Dweepa would have a solid reason to make him do this. But he couldn't resist asking, 'Why did you tell me to first shun the surroundings, and now to focus on them?'

'All in good time, Anirudh.'

'You're really enjoying saying that to me, aren't you? I know I've said it to your ancestor plenty of times ... Haven't I?'

Dweepa laughed, shaking his head. 'Nothing personal, Anirudh.'

Now, meditating, blotting out all things in the background and escaping into oblivion came easily to Anirudh. But the real test was trying to pay attention to his surroundings. He was having a tough time focusing on the sounds, and it was proving to be quite frustrating, especially since he'd always felt he was good at concentrating on anything he'd set his mind to.

Dweepa sensed the frustration in his student, and advised him to focus harder on the task rather than his thoughts. He even told him to speak aloud every single sound he heard. And so, once again, the sage—being an excellent teacher—helped Anirudh achieve his goal. The key, as Anirudh found out, was to focus on one sound at a time. He found this easy to do when uttering what he heard, and he was able to quickly identify all the loud sounds. The chirping of birds, the gurgling of water, the breeze rushing by ...

Then Dweepa told him to tune into the less audible sounds. Anirudh guessed some and spoke up. But for the others, the sage picked them out from the surroundings without even closing his eyes; then he asked Anirudh to locate them. Soon Anirudh started hearing more and more, and the sage trained him to guess the direction from which each sound was coming.

As the days progressed, Anirudh could identify all the sounds around him. To test his newfound skills even further, Dweepa took him to the wide rivulet of Gomati one morning.

As they sat down on the rocks nearby, Dweepa said, 'Hear how noisy this water is?'

It was indeed deafening. It seemed like they were sitting next to a waterfall! Anirudh nodded.

‘Tell me what you hear in the surroundings. And also the direction the sounds are coming from.’

Anirudh nodded again and closed his eyes. He focused his thoughts. First, he heard the loudest sound, of course—the gushing water.

‘The river on my left.’

‘Correct.’

Anirudh tried to focus again. The sound of the water was overpowering, but suddenly he heard a crow cawing above his head.

‘A crow is flying above us, from right to left.’

‘Correct.’

Anirudh now tried picking out different sounds. But the tumult of the water made it impossible. He got irritated and opened his eyes.

‘I cannot focus because of this river. It’s too loud!’ Anirudh complained.

Sage Dweepa flashed a smile of achievement. ‘And *this* is when you shun your surroundings, the loudness, so that you can focus on the many quieter sounds.’

Anirudh couldn’t help but grin. What the sage said astounded him. The ‘illogical’ lesson finally seemed to make sense to him. He closed his eyes again and refocused.

When he did so this time, he felt like he was sitting in a peaceful valley, one in which the rivulet didn’t even exist! Now he could hear many other sounds, like the cuckoo’s chirps to his left and the coursing cool breeze, which was also coming from the same direction.

Dweepa completed his tests for the day, and was secretly impressed. Convinced that Anirudh’s powers of concentration had improved, the sage decided to take his training to the next level. So the following morning, Anirudh and Dweepa sat outside the house for another challenge, facing each other.

‘I’m now going to take you to the next level. Your focus has to be very sharp and accurate. I’m going to *create* sounds, and you have to guess what they are and where they are coming from.’

Anirudh nodded and closed his eyes, readying himself. Suddenly he could hear a faint whooshing movement in front of him.

‘You are moving your hands.’

‘Correct.’ Dweepa was indeed moving his hands in a circular fashion!

Dweepa stopped rotating his hands and set them down on his lap. Anirudh heard a light thump. He knew the circling of the hands had ceased.

‘You are resting your hands on your lap.’

‘Absolutely right.’

Anirudh grinned, his eyes still shut, as did the sage.

Now Dweepa’s smile vanished and was replaced by an expression of total concentration. In quick succession, he waved his hand at a nearby tree on his left, breaking two leaves off a branch. One of the leaves floated to the ground, while the other one was suspended in mid-air by Dweepa’s left hand. With his free hand, Dweepa levitated a stone that was behind Anirudh and placed it softly on the ground, to his left.

Anirudh’s brow was furrowed. He was following the sounds one after the other, his focus unwavering. He finally spoke, disbelief in his tone, ‘You waved your hand. To my right, two leaves were snapped off a branch. One fell to the ground. The other hasn’t fallen yet. Behind me, on my right, a stone was picked up and then placed on the left.’ He paused and pondered a bit about the leaves and the stone. ‘Are you using magic?’

Dweepa smiled broadly. ‘Perfect!’ Then he brought his hands to his chest, his palms facing upwards, towards his bearded chin. The leaf that was suspended in the air slowly descended to the ground. The sage brought his right palm on top of his left palm, and Anirudh heard the leaf touch the grass. Then he heard a curious crackle.

Anirudh said, ‘The second leaf has landed on the ground. And ... I’m not sure ... but I think I heard a fire being lit.’ He could now hear the continuous sputtering of a fire. It was coming from somewhere in front of him. Dweepa remained silent, his eyes dancing with mirth.

Hearing no response from the sage about the intriguing sound, Anirudh opened his eyes and said, ‘How am I able to hear fire—’

He stopped in mid-sentence, his eyes fixed on the unique sight before him.

Dweepa’s smile widened as he saw Anirudh’s awestruck expression. ‘Soon I will start teaching you how to do this.’

Hovering above Dweepa’s palm was a small ball of fire, crackling softly.



TWENTY-TWO

‘Okay, Mom. I’ll call you in the evening. Don’t worry ... Bye.’

Anirudh disconnected the call on his mobile phone and walked back to Sage Dweepa, who was sitting outside the house and reading a religious text.

Anirudh called his parents twice daily. Once in the morning, before they left for work, and once in the evening, after dinner. They were always worried about him—after all, their son had been away for over a month now—but were relieved to know that Dweepa was taking very good care of their son, as promised.

Anirudh sat down next to Dweepa and, acknowledging each other with a smile, they continued their lesson. Anirudh was reading the Mahabharata yet again. However, even though the book was open in front of him, his mind was on something else today—something he had hidden from Dweepa and his family. It was well hidden even from him, as if it were buried deep within him: the pressure of being Kalki, an avatar of God.

Anirudh flipped the page over absent-mindedly as the thoughts collided in his head. Ever since he had started learning to expand and control his mind, he’d realized that he was slowly stepping closer to being Kalki. And since then, sleep rarely came easily to him. He was always in a state of worry. Being an avatar wasn’t child’s play, he had discovered. With it came the burden of immense responsibility and the pressure to deliver. Anirudh knew that even his smallest actions could have large implications. Feeling trapped by these doubts, he didn’t know what to do to squash them or

whom to open up to. He suspected that he lacked the confidence the Kalki avatar should possess.

Anirudh turned another page. Dweepa noticed that he had done so within moments of flipping over to the first page. He looked at Anirudh with concern, and saw that though the boy's eyes were on the book, his focus wasn't.

Dweepa kept his text aside and placed his hand on Anirudh's shoulder. 'What's bothering you, Anirudh?'

Anirudh smiled and shook his head mutely.

'I know that something is on your mind.'

He sighed and looked up at Dweepa. 'I don't know if I can be Kalki, Sage Dweepa. It's a huge responsibility. And I don't know if I can bear it well.'

Dweepa nodded silently, as if urging him to continue.

'What if I make a mistake? I mean ... I am Kalki. The whole world looks to me to save it. What if I do the wrong thing and it hurts people? It's just ... just too much pressure, Sage!'

Dweepa said softly, 'Anirudh, Kalki is a common man first, then a god. There is nothing to be so worried about. And there is no question of whether you can "be" Kalki or not—you *are*.'

Anirudh shrugged and asked him, 'What if I do something wrong?'

'What do you think I'm training you for? It's to ensure that you *always* do the right thing. Whatever decision you take, you should feel right about it. It's important that you believe in every action you take, Anirudh. For only when you have the conviction that what you're doing is right can you convince the world that it indeed is.'

Anirudh smiled weakly.

'Besides, you need not worry about Kalki for now. Right now, Kalki is a secret. By the time the secret is revealed to the world, you will be fully prepared to shoulder his ... *your* responsibilities.'

Anirudh was somewhat relieved after hearing Dweepa's words. He lay back on the grass and stared at the sunny sky before a bout of drowsiness took over.

Anirudh found himself standing in Ksheera Sagar, the ocean of milk, yet again. In front of him, on the huge Ananta Shesha, his Vishnu form was resting peacefully. Even though it looked like he was reposing

with his eyes shut, Anirudh felt that Vishnu was actually looking at the various events happening across the universe, omnipresent as he was. The white waves gently lashed against Ananta Shesha's coils and rocked the snake bed like a cradle.

Vishnu smiled his mischievous smile. He felt like a baby being rocked to sleep. A soft laugh escaped Anirudh's lips too, when the harried sound of anklets broke the silence again. Vishnu's eyes fluttered open.

Stepping out from the mists of the ocean and standing in front of Vishnu was the lady in green—Bhoomidevi. But she was no longer that mesmerizing woman whom Anirudh had seen in his previous dream. Her condition now was horrifying. Vishnu rushed to her and held her in his arms. Gently picking her up, he made her sit on the bed. Seeing her sad state brought tears to Anirudh's and Vishnu's eyes.

Her green saree was torn in many places. In fact, it looked like a ragged piece of cloth, as though someone had brutally slashed it with a knife. The saree's edges were black, like someone had singed it with fire. But even worse affected were her hands and face. Scars ran deep in dashes of crimson. Her arms were covered with numerous burns, even as blood oozed from open gashes. Dried blood was visible on some old wounds, which had left cracked brown patches on her formerly flawless skin. The skin on her face was dry beyond repair, and she sported creases of weariness. Her grey hair was streaked with red, and her eyes, too, were a ghastly grey.

Anirudh could hardly recognize Bhoomidevi! She was in a deplorable state, and his heart went out to her. *Who would dare do such a horrific thing to her?* he thought.

In a gut-wrenching voice, she cried out, 'Look what our children have done to me!'

Stunned, Vishnu sighed, his tears caught in his throat.

'Every day they just keep fighting among themselves! And they keep destroying me and polluting me without thought!'

Vishnu held her hands in his, silently listening to her lament.

'I can't take it any more, my lord. Please ... please save me.'

Vishnu embraced Bhoomidevi and closed his eyes. After a long moment, when he opened them, they were like pools of blood. He

whispered coldly, 'I am coming, Devi. I am coming soon. You will be avenged.'

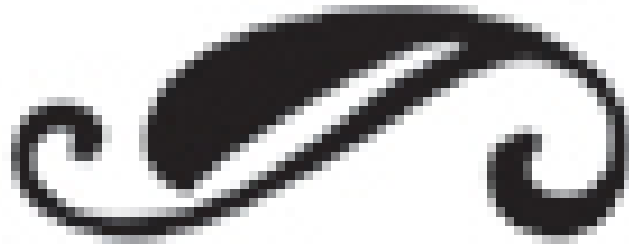
Anirudh caught a glimpse of the lord's eyes, and was terrified. He was seething with anger, Anirudh could tell.

Bhoomidevi broke away from the god and bowed to him, taking her leave.

But Vishnu was still holding her hand. 'I am coming *now*. The time has come for my Kalki avatar to take birth on earth.'

Saying so, Vishnu let go of Bhoomidevi. She gave him a haunting look and left.

Anirudh gaped at Vishnu. His eyes were still flaming red—like churning oceans of blood.



'... And then I woke up. Red eyes and enraged breathing—that's what I saw last.' Anirudh finished narrating the dream to Sage Dweepa.

On hearing about the pitiful state of Bhoomidevi, Dweepa sobbed into his hands. He touched the ground with his fingers and smeared the earth on his forehead. Wiping his tears on his saffron robes, he looked at Anirudh.

'So that's the reason why you were born early ... before time. Bhoomidevi's condition is unforgivable.'

'Well ... It's not surprising that I was born early. Man has been fighting so much—bitter wars, and terrorist attacks every other day. And all the pollution—dirty rivers and dying oceans, global warming ... Man has ruined everything. All this affects Bhoomidevi. And it will keep affecting her ... till it eventually kills her. It's my job to stop this from happening.'

Dweepa patted Anirudh's back and sighed. 'So do you see why it's crucial that you accept your role as Kalki?'

Anirudh nodded. 'Yeah. I'm glad I had this dream. It has affected me ... deeply ... Motivated me to fight for what is right.' Turning to Dweepa with

strangely calm yet grave eyes, he added in a low voice, ‘I don’t want to give up on mankind just yet.’

His teacher looked at him, puzzled.

Anirudh stared into the distance, his shoulders squared, resolve radiating from his being. ‘Though I am destined to be the harbinger of pralaya, the great flood that will end this yuga, I don’t want to be the destroyer of the universe. I ... I want to fight and keep man alive.’

Dweepa said kindly, ‘Your destiny is also to restore the balance between good and evil, to purify the earth—remember that. And though you are bound to your destiny, the journey you take to fulfil it is up to you.’

Anirudh felt the turbulence in his mind subside. He had suddenly recalled a verse he had read in the Bhagavad Gita. Only now did he realize what it really meant. He recited the words softly but with purpose, evoking their significance as he watched the leaves dancing in the distance:

*Yada yada hi dharmasya
Glanir bhavati Bharata
Abhyutthanam adharmasya
Tadatmanam srjami aham*

Dweepa observed Anirudh’s changed demeanour. Smiling, he translated, ‘Whenever and wherever there is a decline in righteousness, O descendant of Bharata, and a predominant rise of unrighteousness—at that time, I descend myself.’

‘You have already informed the world that you will take birth when adharma rises. So it shouldn’t be a surprise at all that you took birth well ahead of time. You are the lord, after all. You can do as you please.’

Anirudh looked towards the horizon and only laughed. But the laugh didn’t reach his eyes.



TWENTY-THREE

‘It is not magic, Anirudh,’ Dweepa insisted.

The two were sitting on the grass for another training session.

‘It is just a form of psychokinesis,’ Dweepa continued. ‘That means moving something with the powers of your mind only. The human mind is capable of a great many things, Anirudh, most of which the modern man hasn’t discovered yet.’ The sage added with a chuckle, ‘But what I am doing—and what you are about to learn—is the actual creation of the elements—earth, fire, wind and water—not just movements.’

Anirudh furrowed his brow and looked quizzically at Dweepa. He was trying to fathom the meaning of his guru’s words. The sage, looking at his student’s questioning expression, explained what he had said. ‘I just use the forces of nature around me. I take energy from my surroundings and convert it into the form I want. So I reproduce energy in the desired form.’

‘Ohh ...’ Anirudh whispered.

Dweepa continued. ‘But for you to perform this, you will first need to master the art of psychokinesis.’

‘Okay ...’

Dweepa stretched out his right arm and opened his palm. Instantly, a small ball of fire materialized above it. This was replaced by a ball of water. Then swirling wind.

Anirudh’s eyes widened.

‘How am I able to do this, you ask? By converting energy from one form to another. Now, you may ask me how energy is converted.’

Anirudh smiled and shrugged.

‘I ask nature for energy. I take it from nature.’

When Anirudh still seemed confused, Dweepa began, ‘Nature gives me the fire, water and wind. I only manifest it ...’

Anirudh nodded slowly, trying to wrap his head around the concept.

‘Okay, let us start practising. Maybe it’ll be easier to understand then!’

Anirudh grinned, desperately eager to try.

‘Close your eyes and meditate. Calm your mind, Anirudh. Don’t rush into it. Just breathe deeply and move towards a state of peace.’

Anirudh slowed his breathing considerably. Then he inhaled deeply, shunned his surroundings and gathered his thoughts.

Once he thought Anirudh’s breathing had returned to normal, Dweepa spoke again. ‘Do you feel an unknown tension surrounding you? Some mysterious vibrations ... Can you feel them?’

Anirudh focused harder. He did kind of feel like a thick blanket of air was enveloping his body. And suddenly he felt a jolt! He tipped his head to indicate a yes.

Dweepa said, ‘Now stretch out your right hand.’

Anirudh did as he was told.

Now the sage asked, ‘Can you feel the unknown vibrations on your palm too?’

Anirudh waited, and once again he felt pulsating dense air. His excitement growing, he slowly nodded his head.

‘This unknown vibration is the energy present around you. It is this energy that we can convert into different forms and manifest as different elements.’ The sage paused looking at his keen student. He continued, breathing deeply, ‘Now, let’s try to apply psychokinesis on this energy. Try to mould the energy on top of your palm into the shape of a ball.’

Anirudh tried very hard to focus his mind on the task, but was unsuccessful. Dweepa could feel the energy quivering above Anirudh’s open palm, the waves moving because of his will, but his concentration was falling short.

‘Calm down, Anirudh. Relax your mind. Forget that you have to *make* a ball out of the energy. Just feel it for now—the energy on top of your palm. You feel the vibrations?’

Anirudh unclenched his mind. He inhaled sharply and repeated the steps. At first he could feel no difference. But then, slowly, after a while, he felt

the air weighing down on him ever so slightly. He felt the tiny vibrations on his palm. He let out a smile.

Dweepa kept a reassuring hand on Anirudh's shoulder. 'Yes, just feel its presence. Absorb the feeling into your hand.'

Anirudh focused on the thick swirl of air. He felt some weight accumulating on his palm, only the slightest—the energy! Dweepa, looking at his progress, felt proud. He was also quite alarmed to see Anirudh attract this amount of energy, that too at such an early stage.

The teacher continued. 'Get used to the feeling in your hand.'

Dweepa waited patiently as Anirudh took his time. Minutes later, the sage removed his hand from Anirudh's shoulder and continued with his instructions.

'Now, imagine that you are touching it. Think ... *think* that you are touching the energy with an invisible hand.'

Anirudh found that difficult to do. *How does one imagine* touching sheer invisible energy with their hands? he wondered. But he decided to give it a shot, taking it slow. He visualized an invisible hand over his palm, gently cupping the energy. For a moment nothing happened, but then suddenly he felt as if his invisible fingers were softly caressing the energy.

Seeing the ripples above his palm, Dweepa admired Anirudh's efforts. The sage spoke gently, 'Now, using your fingers, try to create the ball.'

Anirudh felt his invisible fingers close in on the energy. He slowly tried to mould it into the shape of a ball, pressing down on it. Dweepa was ecstatic to see the result: a ball of energy in his student's palm. Anirudh, too, could feel a ball hovering above his palm. A smile appeared on his face.

Dweepa kept his hand on Anirudh's shoulder again. 'Now, imagine this to be a ball of fire. Energy can take any form. So, by imagining it, *force* this ball of energy to take the form of fire.'

Anirudh tried exceptionally hard, his brow furrowing with concentration. But his efforts were in vain. The ball of energy immediately dwindled into nothing. Anirudh felt the cool breeze blowing on his now empty hand. He opened his eyes and exhaled loudly, feeling defeated.

Dweepa patted Anirudh's back. 'It happens, my boy. Happened with me too ... But you did much, much better than my first time. I could hardly feel the energy in my first lesson.'

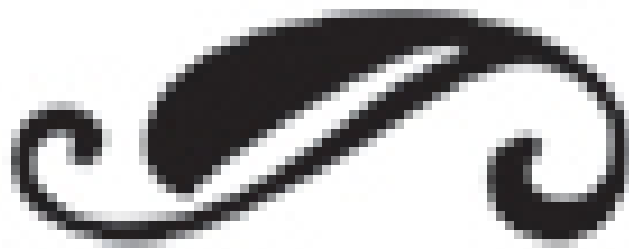
Anirudh smiled, feeling a bit reassured.

‘You’ve already identified the energy present in nature, Anirudh. Now, I just hope I am a good enough teacher to help you harness it.’

Anirudh shook his head at Dweepa’s modesty. ‘You *are* a good teacher, Sage Dweepa. A very good one, I must say. You’ve helped me achieve so much in so little time ...’

Dweepa laughed. ‘It’s because I have a good student! Don’t lose heart. You will learn with practice, just as I did.’

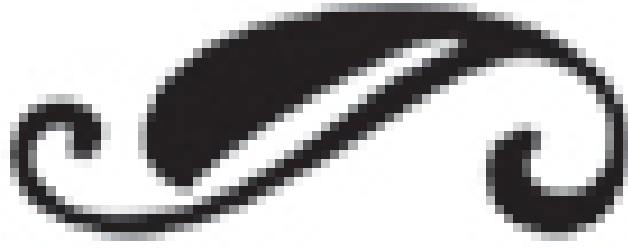
Anirudh nodded, and the two retired inside for lunch.



As the days passed, and the last couple of weeks of training were upon them, Anirudh determinedly practised harnessing the energy and tried to convert it into other forms. While he had long mastered discerning the energy, he was still failing at manipulating its form.

Dweepa consoled and counselled Anirudh constantly, saying it would come to him and that he just needed to give it some more time. The teacher was bent on advancing Anirudh’s training, and so he taught the boy to use the energy as a weapon—by focusing it on certain objects and exerting it forcefully. Anirudh picked this up quickly, and was soon using the energy to attract objects towards him too.

Dweepa grew proud of his student. Anirudh was making progress at a great pace. He could now move objects and push and pull things with little concentration. The sage assured him that with continued practice, he could perform these tasks with a flick of his fingers.



Before they knew it, two months of training had almost come to an end. It was time for Dweepa and Anirudh to return to Chennai, the boy's home.

On the last day of their stay in Dwarka, Anirudh asked Dweepa at dinner, 'Why did you bring me to Dwarka? That too for practising? We could have done this in Chennai too, couldn't we?'

Dweepa looked at his student intently. Over the course of the two months, the sage had observed many changes in Anirudh. Though he'd always seemed a fairly confident boy, now he had a certain resolve about him; a sense of purpose and a strong will fortified his personality.

'It was your instruction to my ancestor. In your Krishna avatar, you'd wanted to be brought here because this is where you lived most of your life. This is where you died. You felt you would need to get in touch with yourself, and it would—*should* commence in Dwarka. You knew you would have to discover yourself, and this had to be the starting point.'

Anirudh nodded slowly, absorbing what the sage said.

'And I think you were right. You truly started discovering yourself here; it wouldn't have been possible in the city.'

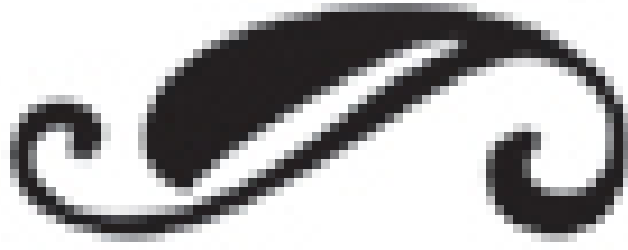
Anirudh raised his brows, 'How so?'

'You feel at home here, in the midst of nature. You've found peace. You have mastered harnessing natural energy. I think it's because your soul is more connected to this place.'

Anirudh shrugged his shoulders and continued to eat.

Dweepa smiled. 'In the end only you can know why you wanted to return here. And there is one more thing: you had told my ancestor that there was a secret to be discovered here, in Dwarka.'

Anirudh stopped eating and stared at Sage Dweepa, wondering what the secret could be.



This time, Anirudh saw his Krishna avatar seated on a wooden swing suspended from the ceiling. The ornate swing, made of gold, was studded with gemstones. He was alone in the large room.

Anirudh looked around. It was a majestic chamber, dotted with oil lamps. He was in a palace, he deduced. In front of him, at the centre of the room, was a small pool of water on which floated fresh pink lotuses. Behind him was a large window, through which cool air wafted in, playing with the sheer curtains.

It was night time, and the dark sky outside matched his own glistening skin. Anirudh smiled—that's how he had earned the name Shyam. He turned to look at Krishna, and noticed that he held a wooden flute in his hand.

Swaying to and fro on the swing, Krishna brought the flute to his lips. He started moving his fingers on the flute, gently blowing air into the reed instrument and emitting a melodious lullaby. Even the trees went into a trance, the breeze blew lazily, carrying sleep in its cool embrace, and the birds chirped softly, tucking their heads into their chests and falling into deep slumber.



TWENTY-FOUR

Anirudh and Dweepa left for Chennai the following morning, and on their journey back home, Anirudh asked the sage much about the Krishna avatar. Dweepa was happy to answer his student's questions and encouraged him to ask more whenever he wanted. Dweepa also quizzed Anirudh on the initial chapters of the Mahabharata to understand what he had learnt from the text. He was filled with pride when Anirudh answered each question correctly. He was indeed a fast learner.

When the two reached Anirudh's home two days later, they were welcomed with open arms. Mohini hugged him tightly, tears streaming down her face. She was relieved to see her son back home, safe and sound. Bhaskar smiled broadly, patting Anirudh on the head and pulling him into an embrace. Over dinner, the parents thanked Dweepa profusely and offered to host him in their home, but the sage politely declined. He informed them of his decision to take up a flat nearby, since it was his duty to be near the Kalki avatar.

After the meal was over, Dweepa met with Anirudh in his room and gave him some last-minute advice. He instructed his young student to keep reading the Mahabharata and practising the energy harnessing lessons. Anirudh assured him that he would and also that he would drop by Dweepa's home once in a while.

After Dweepa left, Anirudh and his parents had a long chat about his stay in Dwarka before the household retired for the night and the house became silent.

Anirudh found himself darting between trees. He was in his ninth avatar, and was making his way through a forest with a deep sense of urgency. Night had fallen. Rain was pouring down heavily. Lightning lit up the dense canopy above him in snatches, lending the wet surroundings a surreal pale-green glow. Despite the eerie scene, Krishna continued to move forward, sure of the direction he was taking and the path in front of him. Krishna quickened his pace even as he turned back once in a while to see if anyone was following him. He was all alone.

He reached a large stream that was growling in the rainy night. He turned to his left and squinted at the grove of trees some twenty feet from the river. The rain was coming down harder now. Then walking up to one of the trees, he found a big circle on the bark and traced the shape with his fingers. Still watching his back, Krishna pressed the bark directly behind the circle, all the way around the circumference of the trunk. A panel slid in, as though the circle had been a button.

Immediately, Krishna felt the ground tremble and turned to see that a portion of the rocky riverbed beneath the gushing stream had slid aside, revealing a gaping hole. Water now rushed into the opening.

Krishna walked towards the rivulet. Reaching the bank, he studied the hole and, at the same time, clutched the circular locket hanging from his neck. He had to hide it before anyone found him!

He stepped into the stream. As he started to walk towards the gaping compartment, he caught his reflection in the water. His head was soaking wet because of the torrential downpour. His limp long hair was strewn all over his face. Water dripped down his body in narrow trickles. Krishna hurried and finally waded to the hole. He took a deep breath and dived in.

Anirudh woke with a start. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead. He wiped it with his left sleeve and lay back on the bed, thinking about the dream. *What locket was that? Why was it so important to hide it?* Anirudh touched his neck unconsciously, like Krishna had done in his dream before jumping down the yawning hole in the middle of the river. *How strange ...* Immersed in thoughts surrounding the mysterious dream, Anirudh stayed awake till the wee hours of the morning before finally falling asleep.

The next day, he met Dweepa in his new home. Surprisingly, it was similar to his previous lodging. It was a one-room apartment, sparsely furnished and with minimal decor. Anirudh liked the simple dwelling. They were seated on a couch in the living room, overlooking a window.

‘A locket shaped like a circle?’ Dweepa asked.

Anirudh nodded.

The sage scratched his bearded chin and looked out of the window, at the blue sky peppered with white clouds. The sun was playing hide-and-seek among them, quickly changing its hiding place from behind one cloud to another.

‘I seemed a little worried but purposeful, and I was going to hide that locket,’ Anirudh began. ‘It was a rainy night, and I was walking quickly through the woods. I clutched the locket in my hand, but I didn’t get to see it properly. Then I reached a considerably large stream and scanned the trees near the bank. I walked to one and pressed what was, I think, a concealed button, which slid open a circular door in the middle of the stream’s floor. I walked to that hole, wading through the gushing waters, and jumped into it. That’s when I woke up.’

Dweepa looked at Anirudh thoughtfully and then said, ‘I don’t recall Lord Krishna having any such locket, at least not one that was famous. It could be some lesser known accessory. But I shall do some research and get back to you when I find something.’

The two talked for a while after that. The sage inquired about his progress with the Mahabharata, while Anirudh informed him that his new term at college was going to start the following week. After some time, Anirudh left for home, while Dweepa headed to a local library to read up about the locket that worried his lord.



TWENTY-FIVE

Indraprastha, The Night of the Mayasabha's Inauguration, Dwapara Yuga

Krishna walked briskly, making his way to the room at the very end of the corridor. Dim oil torches lit his path as he walked across Yudhishtira's palace. The light bounced off the gleaming white marble, making Krishna slow down to admire the handiwork of the brilliant architect. The play of light on the polished surfaces gave it the effect of rippling water. It was mesmerizing.

The raj sabha, or royal court, of Yudhishtira—called Mayasabha—had been inaugurated just that morning, amid grand festivities and feasting and free-flowing wine. The effect of the heavy drinking was apparent in the loud snores coming from the chambers that Krishna passed by.

He smiled to himself. *It's good that everyone is fast asleep. I can meet him in peace, without fear of being overheard.*

Krishna reached the last room in the corridor. He waited for a few moments, making sure he wasn't being spied upon. Slowly raising his hand, he knocked thrice on the door, with a pause between each knock.

The door creaked open, letting a ray of yellow light escape. Krishna threw another glance down the empty corridor and hastily entered the room. The door closed noiselessly behind him.

Krishna looked around the large, well-furnished room. A comfortable bed overlooking a huge window occupied centre stage. The room was lit by

oil lamps set in alcoves along the maroon marble walls. The light reflecting off the surface made it look like gold spread on a sheet of velvet. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

Krishna smiled and turned to the occupant of the room. ‘Your architecture is impressive, Maya! I must confess I am awestruck.’

Maya bowed low, saying, ‘Thank you, my lord! It is indeed by your grace and mercy that I have been able to construct this palace. If it wasn’t for you, I would probably be dead by now.’

‘Ah ... How could I let you die, my friend?’

Krishna sat on one of the cushioned chairs near the bed. He motioned Maya to sit next to him. As Maya approached, Krishna observed him. The man was dark-skinned and had a heavy built. He sported a huge bushy moustache, which curled at the tips. A golden dhoti was tied around his waist, and chunky gold bracelets encircled his wrists. His hair was oiled, but ruffled. His eyes were wide, and his prominent teeth were yellowing. He was an asura, but a kind-hearted one.

Seated, Maya waited for Krishna to speak, who cleared his throat. ‘The reason I didn’t let Arjuna kill you in Khandavaprastha is because you are meant for greater things, Maya. This palace ...’ Krishna said, waving his hand around the room, ‘The construction was a test of your skills. And you, Maya, have exceeded my expectations.’

Maya smiled, then looked at Krishna with some questions on his mind. He was trying to figure out where this was headed.

Krishna continued. ‘Like I said, you are destined for greater things. By building this beautiful piece of architecture, you have earned my confidence and trust.’

Maya beamed with pride, his stained teeth showing themselves in full glory.

Krishna moved closer to the asura and lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘I have two jobs for you, Maya—jobs that beg your expertise. Are you ready?’

Maya nodded his head vigorously.

‘Good! I shall tell you of the first job now, Maya. The second I shall tell you later. Is that acceptable to you?’

Maya murmured his assent eagerly.

‘Your first job is to build a small chamber under the flowing waters of a river.’

Maya's eyes widened. Krishna smiled and went on to explain his requirements.



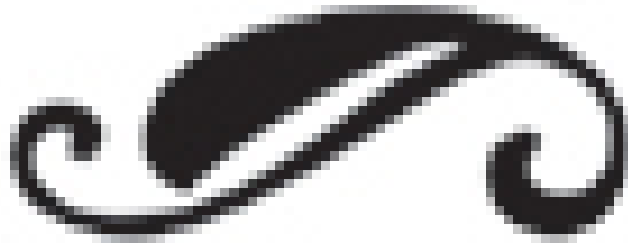
TWENTY-SIX

Anirudh found himself in the same dream again, in the form of his previous avatar.

Krishna was walking through the woods, his pace quick. There was no rain today, and the crescent moon shone from the sky like a tiara. It was a beautiful night. But he didn't have the time to appreciate the moon or its silver sheen. He walked past the trees with determination. In his left hand was a string of thread to which was tied a locket—a broken conch shell. It was the lower half, also called the body whorl. Krishna hurried to the stream.

His flute tucked in his waistband, the lord of Dwarka went up to the particular tree. Like before, he pressed the bark and, in the centre of the stream, a circular hole opened up. Krishna walked briskly to the bank and then waded to the hole. Water poured into the open mouth, giving it the effect of a waterfall.

Taking a deep breath, Krishna jumped inside.



The bell sounded across the college, signalling that classes were over for the day. Anirudh packed his books and left the classroom with his friends, discussing the day's lectures and assignments.

By and by, Anirudh was learning to manage his dual life and his time, which was spent juggling his college work, soccer, gym workouts, energy harnessing sessions and the Mahabharata, of course. He had put aside the epic for the weekends, since his weekdays were mostly filled with everything else, and he found it difficult to absorb the text amid other tasks. The energy harnessing exercise was something he did whenever he was idle, sometimes even before going to sleep. Since his college had reopened, meetings with Dweepa had become considerably few and far between, but Anirudh had requested one at the beach that day. He had something to share with Dweepa.

The sound of the waves rushing to meet the shore always brought peace to Dweepa's mind. With his back resting against a tree, he waited at the beach for Anirudh, relaxing in the shade and sipping coconut water. He looked at the blue of the sea touching the azure sky at the horizon. The sun's rays shimmered on the waves. The beach was such a wonderful place to be at, even on a hot afternoon! The cool breeze coming in from the sea and the sweet coconut water expelled the heat from his body, while the shade of the tree protected him from the scorching sun and the moist sand made for a comfortable seat.

A few minutes later, Anirudh arrived and sat next to Dweepa, who offered to buy him coconut water. Anirudh refused.

'You have any idea what the circular locket is?' he asked breathlessly.

Dweepa shook his head. 'There is no reference to any such circular locket ever being worn by Krishna. I had a doubt that it may be the Syamantaka jewel, but it wasn't. Krishna never kept it. Its owner, Prasenjit, had lost it, and Krishna recovered and returned it to him. Prasenjit offered the gem to Krishna, but he refused to accept it because people had fought and spilt blood over it. So the Syamantaka definitely wasn't the locket you were clutching.'

Anirudh pondered for a while and then said, 'I was trying to hide the locket. It could be at the time when the Syamantaka was in my possession ...' Anirudh corrected himself, 'In Krishna's possession.'

Dweepa smiled.

‘So maybe my dream was about the period when the Syamantaka was with me,’ Anirudh continued. ‘After all, history does mention me having the Syamantaka jewel for some time. So isn’t there a possibility that I was indeed hiding the Syamantaka?’

‘Let us assume that you did hide the Syamantaka, but you must have taken it out of its hiding place because you had to return it to Prasenjit.’

Anirudh nodded, deducing that if the locket was the Syamantaka, then it wouldn’t be present in the underwater room any longer.

‘We have no idea what that circular locket is, then?’

Dweepa shook his head as Anirudh let out a sigh.

‘You wanted to meet me, Anirudh. Why?’

‘What is the significance of the broken conch-shell locket hanging from your neck?’ Anirudh cut to the chase.

Sage Dweepa looked down at the locket and caressed it. ‘Lord Krishna had given this to my ancestor. This locket identifies that I am Dweepa. You gave it to him so that I could be recognized by you in your Kalki avatar—you know this already from a dream, right?’

Anirudh sighed deeply. ‘Yes, and I—Krishna—kept the other half of the conch shell, but ... Last night, I had a dream about a broken conch-shell locket. In the dream, I, as Krishna, was going to hide it. Just like I did with the circular locket. The hiding place was also the same. I went to the stream and made my way to the hole. That’s all I saw.’

After Anirudh finished narrating his dream, he fell silent. Lost in thought, he asked, ‘So what do my dreams mean?’

Dweepa, too, remained silent as he gazed at the beach, where the waves were playfully jumping over each other to reach the shore.

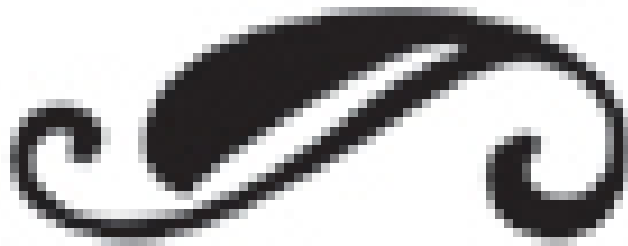
‘Anirudh, one thing is clear: you are using dreams to communicate with yourself regarding things you want to be informed about. In both dreams, the place you seem to be at—the hiding place—appears to be the same. And in both, you are hiding something. I think you are telling yourself that what you’ve hidden needs to be retrieved.’

‘I want to do so, but, Sage, I have no idea where I have hidden them! They’re under a stream in a forest, I suppose. *But where?*’

Dweepa understood what was going through Anirudh’s anxious mind. He kept a hand on his shoulder and patted it. ‘You will come to know of the place. Just give it some time. This will come to you too.’

Dweepa tried to divert the conversation to Anirudh's progress—with the Mahabharata and the energy harnessing lessons. Anirudh informed the sage that now he was able to move things without even closing his eyes, but he still wasn't able to convert energy into any other form. Dweepa reassured him that it would happen in good time. Anirudh smiled sadly, knowing full well that the sage was trying to make him feel better.

As they were walking back from the beach, Anirudh told Dweepa about the dream he had had back in Dwarka, in which he had been playing the flute. The sage was happy to know that Anirudh was in touch with his previous avatar. He stressed that it was essential for Krishna and Kalki to share their thoughts and traits, and that even the uneventful dreams conveyed some form of truth about each other, as well as beauty.



Anirudh found his Krishna self looking outside the window of his palatial bedroom. It was dawn. The orange sun was just peeping out over the distant horizon.

Krishna smiled at Mother Nature, who was peacefully asleep. It was time to wake her! He brought the flute to his lips and gently blew into it. He was playing a song so soft and melodious that Mother Nature simply had to wake up and hear it. Infused with energy, her trees shuddered, her flowers fanned out their petals, her birds chirped and her cows opened their eyes. A breeze had started spreading the morning scent even though the sun hadn't yet completely revealed itself.

Krishna kept playing, his fingers gliding on his favourite instrument. By the time he finished, Mother Nature was wide awake. Krishna beamed on seeing her in her full glory.



TWENTY-SEVEN

Kalanayaka stood poised, facing five Kalabakshakas who were surrounding him at a few feet's distance. While both sides sized each other up in the centre of the hall, along its walls were seated fellow Kalabakshakas, wildly cheering on the fighters.

They were about to watch Kalanayaka go up against the Kalabakshakas. Kalarakshasa and Kalaguru Bhairava occupied front row chairs. It was a mock battle, a test. Kalanayaka was pitted against five of the best sorcerers to see how well he would respond in real combat.

Kalarakshasa had been observing Kalanayaka's training for the past few sessions. During practice, he performed extremely well. But what bothered Kalarakshasa was Kalanayaka's aggressiveness, which was fuelled by fury. His rage was what made him a good sorcerer. It was his weapon, which had led him to victory many a time in the past. But in Kalarakshasa's view, fury was a weakness. It could be used by the enemy to their advantage.

To the Demon of Time, combat was like a maths problem. He believed that when one was asked to add two numbers, or a set even, it didn't mean that one needed to add them rapidly just because one knew how to. If one did so, they were bound to make mistakes. Instead of adding in haste, if one added the numbers slowly, using logical thinking, one could still reach the correct answer. Without making mistakes. The same lesson, he thought, was yet to be learnt by Kalanayaka.

The Kalabakshakas had shown him the moves and taught him to fight well. And he had learnt impressively fast. But when he duelled, he still

fought with anger. His attacks were powerful, but they were driven by his fury. If ever Kalanayaka were to fight Kalarakshasa, the latter knew he wouldn't stand a chance for he would be up against one who knew how to manipulate the opponent's fury to their own advantage.

Kalarakshasa leaned back on his throne and waited. He had a clear view of the fighters. He wanted to see if the new student could maintain his calm and grace as well as deliver his attacks while building his defences at the same time.

In the middle of the arena, Kalanayaka studied his opponents. He scrutinized their every movement and stance, as if he were reading their thoughts. This was because he knew that after a stance had been taken, the hands could move only in a certain direction. So if one paid attention to this, they could predict the nature of the attack. But he was also aware that it was possible to change the stance at the last moment and launch an unexpected offence. For this, one had to be exceptionally quick.

Kalanayaka saw that the hands of his opponents were held out defensively in front of their chests, like the posture of a boxer. *The whip attack!* That's what they were planning—their stance gave it away! The whip attack was a move by which a slash through the air could release a burst of energy or an element against the opponent. Kalanayaka knew that if all five of them performed the attack together, the battle would be over for him. So he couldn't wait for his opponents to attack first. *He* was ready, which meant the battle had begun! He trained his mind to think about Kalki, the 'god' who was out there. *God!* Anger started bubbling inside him. *Kalki, I want your blood ...*

Kalarakshasa saw the fury rising inside Kalanayaka. He leaned forward, eager to see what the first move would be.

Kalanayaka gritted his teeth as looked at his opponents. There was a build-up of energy in his hands, and he clenched his fists. Consciously, he let the rage within him attract his mind. He recalled his childhood.

Guruji was right! There is indeed no God! If God were present, he would have saved me and my friends from that horrible shelter home. But that didn't happen. The shelter owner made us beg every day, from morning to night. He beat us mercilessly. Whatever funds we received, he kept for himself. He didn't give us any food. We had to cry ourselves to sleep, day in and day out ...

Waves of wrath rose within Kalanayaka.

There is no God! For God never helped us ... We were left at the mercy of that monstrous man! God betrayed me and my friends ...

Now something snapped inside Kalanayaka; he was at his extreme. All he saw was red—vengeance.

In a flash, Kalanayaka launched his fists on either side, punching the air. Two opponents, hit with a burst of wind, were blasted against the walls and fell to the floor with a thud, knocked unconscious. And even before the fallen men could touch the ground, Kalanayaka quickly knelt and raised his arms, propelling the opponents to his back and front with sheer force. They were airborne before they could even launch their attack, and they crashed to the ground.

All this occurred in a span of two or three seconds. Only one opponent remained.

The last Kalabakshaka attacked immediately, but Kalanayaka was ready. He swept his left arm upwards, producing a shield against the energy whip that the other was using. His invisible shield absorbed the blow. Now Kalanayaka didn't wait for his opponent to think. He placed his right palm on the ground, shifted his body weight on it, jumped and kicked the air. The Kalabakshaka shot backward and hit the wall at the end of the hall, unconscious.

Kalanayaka got to his feet and bowed to the Kalarakshasa and the other Kalabakshakas in the room. The spectators clapped loudly as Kalanayaka looked at his fallen opponents. The thrill of victory surged through him, a feeling similar to what he had felt many years ago—after finishing his sorcery training, when Kalanayaka had tracked down the shelter home owner and killed him in a manner that would make the insides of any sane man churn. He smirked at the memory.

Meanwhile, Kalarakshasa was smiling menacingly under his red hood. He knew Kalanayaka's attacks were indeed very powerful. So powerful that they had knocked out five trained Kalabakshakas! And it wasn't easy to knock out a Kalabakshaka.

The clapping and cheering stopped abruptly. A wave of silence spread over the large hall. Turning, Kalanayaka was surprised to see Kalarakshasa jumping into the arena!

The Demon of Time was seething as he approached. He wanted to teach his new student a lesson he would never forget: that fury wasn't as effective

as he thought, and that he wasn't invincible. Kalarakshasa stopped a few feet away from Kalanayaka and bowed.

'Duel with me.'

Kalanayaka was stunned.

The room became still, like every breath had been caught at that command.

'It's an order, Kalanayaka.'

Kalarakshasa gave Kalanayaka two seconds to react, then sent a fistful of energy at him, hitting him square in the chest. It wasn't a heavy punch, so Kalanayaka only reeled back by a few steps. The student understood it was just a warning, and that the challenge to a duel was indeed real.

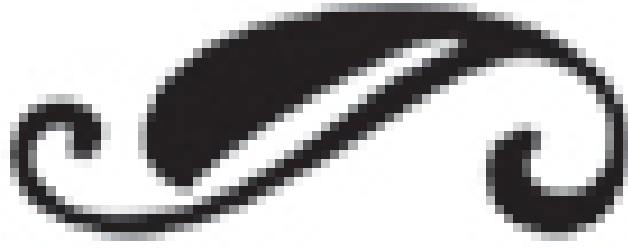
Once again, Kalanayaka invoked his fury and punched the air. Waves of energy took a circular shape before him, like that of a ball, and charged towards Kalarakshasa—who was expecting this.

As the throbbing ball neared him, the Lord of Time simply sidestepped it gracefully. It didn't stand a chance against Kalarakshasa. It passed by, and Kalarakshasa turned towards it, his arm outstretched. He scooped up the sphere of energy and, exerting his strength, pushed the ball back, forcing it to reverse its trajectory. Manoeuvring it, he realized something. *There is tremendous energy in the ball! No wonder Kalanayaka's wrath won against the Kalabakshakas!*

Looking up, he saw that Kalanayaka was regarding him with awe. As was every other person in the hall. But his new student snapped out of his admiration and quickly propped up a defence shield in front of him. However, the now thundering ball, so full of energy, burst right through it and hit Kalanayaka on his chest. He felt the sphere pushing his body, dragging him with it. He felt his feet leave the floor as he was hurtled through the air, and he let out a piercing scream. His flight finally broke when he crashed into a wall.

He was crippled by pain and couldn't move even an inch. Slowly, he slumped to the floor. Kalarakshasa didn't look at his defeated opponent twice, and walked straight out the hall.

Kalanayaka couldn't believe what had just happened. His own attack against him! *How did Kalarakshasa turn my weapon against me? It's ... impossible.*



Later that day, Kalanayaka was summoned by Kalarakshasa. The sorcerer was feeling better, though the pain was still there, and, more importantly, the shame.

In his chamber, Kalarakshasa was seated on his golden throne on a raised platform. Behind it, a single red curtain solemnly hung down the wall, stamped with a bull's face. They were alone.

‘Now you know why your guru told you to control your fury?’

Kalanayaka was silent. But not surprised that Kalarakshasa knew such intimate details about him.

‘Your guru told me you are an excellent fighter, but your weakness is your anger.’

Kalanayaka nodded.

‘Being fuelled by fury, you will be able to cause catastrophic damage to your opponent, yes. But it can also cause catastrophic damage to *you*. You can't let rage be the sole source of your energy. If your opponent knows about this, you can be destroyed by your own energy. Just like I did to you today.’

Kalanayaka bowed humbly.

‘Start meditating. It will calm your mind, and you won't need fury to harness your energy. Then you will be able to control it, even use it in a better way. To your advantage.’ With that, he waved his hand, indicating that the meeting was over.

Kalanayaka dipped his head to the master again and left. He resolved to start meditating with a vengeance from the next day. What Kalarakshasa had said made sense. He had to use his fury as a special weapon, rather than his only weapon.



TWENTY-EIGHT

Anirudh found himself walking in a hurry yet again, the flute tucked in the waistband of his silk dhoti. Darkness surrounded him. But the crescent moon dimly lit the path ahead and caused his swarthy body to glimmer. He was making his way through the same forest. In his right hand, he held the broken conch-shell locket. Abruptly, he stopped beside a tree and touched its bark. Yes, it was the ideal spot!

Krishna scratched the bark with the locket, drawing a shape. Since the bark was wet, the conch shell easily cut through it. After some time, he stepped back and studied the carving he had made. It did resemble what he had in mind. Krishna closed his eyes and ran his fingers over the trunk. He wished for the symbol to remain inscribed on the bark for centuries to come. Suddenly, a flash of lightning illuminated the engraving for a split second. A conch shell on the dark-brown bark.

Krishna opened his eyes. Satisfied with his artwork, he looked at the conch shell in his hand, wiping the remains of wet, crumbly bark off the edges. Then he sprinted to the stream.

The water flowed briskly, glowing silver in the moonlit night. Krishna stood on the bank and waved his hand over the waterbody. The flow immediately slowed down. He then stepped into the water, letting the coldness immerse him, and waded through it to reach the other bank. Once he reached land, he stepped out of the rivulet and

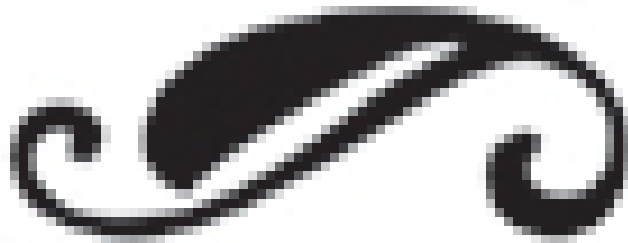
walked to another tree. The one with a circle inscribed on its bark. Once again, Krishna pressed the trunk directly behind the circle.

Closing his eyes, he ran his fingers over the bark and, for a brief moment, the etched circle glowed a brilliant white. He required this tree, too, to remain intact for several centuries. The lord opened his eyes and gazed at the rivulet behind him. As expected, there was a crater in the centre, with water gushing into it. Krishna approached the hole.

He had come to hide his flute.

Anirudh sat up in his bed, the dream still fresh in his mind. He walked to the window and looked out thoughtfully. This time, his former avatar had ventured to the underwater chamber to hide his beloved flute. Apart from that, two things about this vision stood out: the symbol of the conch shell inscribed on the tree and the rivulet.

Anirudh wanted to meet Dweepa as soon as possible. But it was too early. The sun was yet to rise. He checked the clock by his bed. A few minutes past five o'clock. As he was much too excited to sleep again, he lay back, thinking. His plan for the weekend was set.



‘I know where Krishna hid the locket—the remaining half of the conch-shell locket—as well as his flute!’ Anirudh exclaimed.

Dweepa gasped. They were seated at the sage’s small dining table, cups of tea in front of them. ‘That’s why you stopped by so urgently? This is good news, Anirudh!’

Anirudh nodded, barely able to conceal his excitement. He waited for Dweepa to ask him *how* he had figured out the hiding place.

Dweepa, controlling his eagerness, finally asked the question.

‘I dreamt it, of course.’

The sage nodded, having expected the answer. Anirudh then narrated the dream in which Krishna had drawn the symbol on the tree, crossed the rivulet, pressed the button and headed for the crater in the middle of the river. Anirudh didn't leave out any details. He described every single aspect of the dream.

Dweepa stared in awe. He sat quietly, thinking, then asked again, 'How did you find the location of the place from this dream?'

Anirudh smiled mischievously. 'The first clue is the symbol of the conch shell.'

Dweepa looked at Anirudh with surprise. 'The symbol drawn on the tree?'

Anirudh nodded. 'I have seen the symbol with my own eyes.'

Dweepa was wide-eyed. 'What?'

'Yes, it's true. I have indeed seen that symbol ...'

'Where? How can you be sure that it's the same tree? That tree could be anywhere!'

Anirudh's eyes twinkled. 'I know that the tree could be anywhere, and the one I saw may just be a coincidence. But here is where the second clue, the rivulet, comes in.'

'How so?' Dweepa asked.

'After drawing the symbol on the tree, Krishna headed to the rivulet, right? Well, I have been there too.'

Dweepa's jaw dropped. 'Wh-where?'

Anirudh took a couple of moments. A dramatic pause, before he revealed everything.

'In Gujarat, outside Dwarka! Just a few feet from your house!'

Dweepa exhaled and stared at Anirudh in disbelief. Words failed him.

'The stream is the same one whose loud gushing waters you taught me to shun, so I could focus on the other, less audible sounds in the surroundings.'

Dweepa was still reeling from shock of finding out that the rivulet was the one by which he had lived most of his life, something he'd seen every single day!

'In my previous dreams,' Anirudh went on, 'I had approached the rivulet from the opposite bank. But in yesterday's vision, I walked towards it from the bank on which your house stands. I recognized it!'

Dweepa started taking slow, deep breaths to calm his nerves. Once he felt better, he asked, 'What's your next move?'

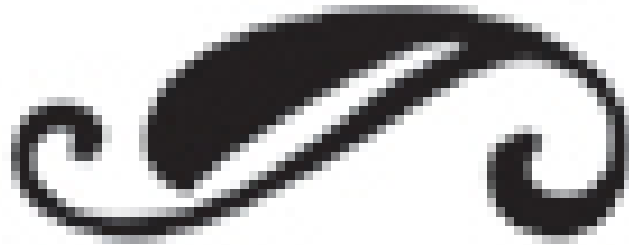
Anirudh smiled. 'We are going there this weekend, Sage. I want to find out *what* I have hidden there and *why* I have hidden it.'

'It's indeed a mystery ... Why would you hide your flute, of all things?'

Anirudh shrugged. 'Hopefully these questions will be answered when we go there.'

'I'm excited to find out.'

'Me too.'



Over breakfast, the two talked some more.

'Now I know why I had to go back to Dwarka,' Anirudh said.

Dweepa stopped eating and looked questioningly at his student.

'In my Krishna avatar, I gave instructions to your ancestor that I should be taken to Dwarka for my training as Kalki, right?'

Dweepa nodded.

'Well, it wasn't just because I died there. It was also because I was supposed to discover the hiding place.' He continued. 'You remember, my first day there I had strolled into the woods alone? And when I returned, you warned me to never venture out alone?'

'I do.' Dweepa remembered that incident vividly. He had been scared for the safety of his lord.

'When I was strolling in the woods, I saw the tree with the conch symbol on it. I even remember thinking it was peculiar ... So I had to be brought back to Dwarka because only I knew how to identify the hiding place, based on my dreams!'

Dweepa smiled thinking about the mysterious ways in which his lord worked. A conch-shell symbol on a tree! Then he remembered a line he had read in the palm leaves. His lord had spoken it to his ancestor.

'Dwarka will have a secret that I will need in my Kalki avatar.'

The sage felt foolish for not recognizing such an important connection sooner.

‘Actually, Anirudh, do you remember I mentioned a secret on our last day in Dwarka? That Lord Krishna had wanted Kalki to be brought to Dwarka because there was a secret hidden there? My lord never said what the secret was or where it was hidden ... But now I know.’

Anirudh’s mind was already elsewhere by now. *Still no clue about the circular locket.* ‘It’s good that we found the hiding place, at least,’ he consoled himself aloud.

While Dweepa made arrangements for flight tickets so that his student wouldn’t miss college, Anirudh returned home after discussing the plan for the weekend. His mind was clouded with questions about the mysterious locket.



TWENTY-NINE

All the Kalabakshakas had gathered in the great dining hall. A deathly silence prevailed over the assembly. Kalarakshasa had called for an urgent meeting, but the throne was unoccupied. Everyone was waiting for his arrival.

After a few minutes, the Lord of Time entered. The group of sorcerers, including Kalanayaka, stood up silently and bowed. Kalarakshasa bowed back and gestured for them to sit. With the hood pulled over his face, he prowled around the table.

‘Kalanayaka, please stand up.’

Kalanayaka was startled to hear his name called out. It instilled great fear in him. Trembling, he got up.

Kalarakshasa walked up to him, patted his shoulder and said, ‘Don’t be afraid.’

Though this calmed the newest sorcerer, it didn’t cure his shivering.

‘Do you know why you were named Kalanayaka?’

Kalanayaka nodded. ‘My guruji gave me that name. It means “hero of time”.’ He felt foolish for explaining the meaning to the Lord of Time himself.

‘But do you know *why* he named you Kalanayaka?’

‘Because I waited patiently until the time came to seek my revenge?’

Kalarakshasa clapped his hands. ‘That’s one. But do you know the main reason?’

Kalanayaka shook his head.

‘You were named Kalanayaka because your guruji thought you were worthy of being a Kalabakshaka one day. You mastered sorcery ... better than any of his other students.’

Kalanayaka remained quiet, trying to figure out why his name was such an important topic today.

‘He recommended that you be recruited into the Kalabakshakas,’ the master went on. ‘Your guruji was sure you were worthy. So he named you Kalanayaka ... And I must confess, he wasn’t wrong. You are indeed worthy of being a Kalabakshaka.’

Kalanayaka didn’t know what to say to this. His head was bursting with myriad thoughts.

‘I am impressed, Kalanayaka. A few years back, you successfully performed a complex sacrifice to placate Goddess Kali. And just two days ago, you accomplished another complicated ritual for her—satiating her hunger with the sacrifice of a goat. Yes, I am impressed.’

Kalanayaka flashed a slight smile. He had asked for her blessings to vanquish Kalki in the coming days.

‘You are brave, I will give you that,’ the Demon of Time declared. ‘But you are also foolish.’

Now Kalanayaka grew frightened again.

Kalarakshasa turned to the other Kalabakshakas, a finger pointed at Kalanayaka. ‘This man, Kalanayaka, attempted to kill Dweepa a few months back. I appreciate his efforts. But he could have got himself killed. Or, worse, thwarted our plans. But he was brave, so I brought him to our palace.’

Kalarakshasa faced Kalanayaka again, who was staring at the man in the silk robe, unable to comprehend what was happening. ‘Yes, it is I who brought you here. And if you had been successful in killing Dweepa that day, we would have lost our only link to Kalki.’

Kalanayaka dropped his head in shame. In his head, though, he confirmed that it was the Lord of Time who had teleported him here. He recalled that his guruji had told him Kalarakshasa was a master of the skill.

‘I made you a Kalabakshaka, and I am happy to see that you have been a quick learner. You have pleased me very much.’

Kalanayaka bowed low.

‘So I offer you a special assignment. A mission. Your first mission as a Kalabakshaka.’

Kalanayaka felt overwhelmed. He was excited and terrified at the same time.

Kalarakshasa now addressed everyone at the table, ‘Dweepa and Kalki have met, as you know. They went to Gujarat, to Dwarka, and Dweepa has been teaching Kalki. They returned to Kalki’s home two weeks back. But Kalki hasn’t been able to master energy conversion.’

The Kalabakshakas listened with rapt attention, amazed at the knowledge of their master.

‘But yesterday, Dweepa booked two plane tickets to Gujarat.’ He paused and looked directly at Kalanayaka. ‘I want you to kill Dweepa and Kalki, Kalanayaka. I will tell you where to wait for them.’

Kalanayaka couldn’t believe the sequence of events presented before him. Mechanically he bowed to Kalarakshasa, and once again in response to the short applause he got from the Kalabakshakas. And just like that, it had been decided.

Kalarakshasa signalled for dinner to be served and walked up to his throne. Under his hood, his eyes were fixed on Kalanayaka. He smiled. There was a reason why he had chosen Kalanayaka and none other—his rage. Yes, he had shown the man his place a few weeks ago, but only because he’d wanted him to control it. And Kalanayaka had been doing well since then. He meditated religiously, and had learnt to channel his anger. Kalarakshasa was very pleased with his decision.

Dweepa wouldn’t stand a chance against him. And Kalki doesn’t even know energy conversion yet, the child! I doubt things have changed in Chennai.

Owing to Kalki’s lack of even the most basic duelling abilities, Kalarakshasa felt it was an easy enough mission for Kalanayaka. All Kalanayaka had to do was believe in himself and harness the powers correctly, with patience. And once he subdued Dweepa and Kalki, he would take control of the situation and kill them both.

The Demon of Time pushed these thoughts out of his mind and focused on his dinner. Yes, he was eagerly awaiting the moment Dweepa and Kalki would be dead.

Sage Dweepa and Kalki will never know what hit them!



THIRTY

‘**W**hat is your dream, Kalanayaka? Your dearest wish? What do you want to become?’ Kalarakshasa asked.

Kalanayaka was standing in Kalarakshasa’s chamber, who was seated behind his table, while Kalaguru Bhairava sat across from him. Once dinner was done, Kalarakshasa had summoned Kalanayaka to his chamber.

Kalanayaka hesitated before answering, for he didn’t know whether the answer would be appropriate. But he decided to take the risk.

‘I wish to be as powerful as you, my lord.’

Kalarakshasa’s lips curled into a smile underneath the red hood. He exchanged a glance with Bhairava. ‘So you desire more power? You want to be as powerful as me? That’s ... That’s a great dream to have, an ambitious one at that.’

Kalanayaka looked up at the hooded figure. ‘Apologies, my lord. I didn’t intend to offend you in any way ...’

Kalarakshasa laughed. ‘How can you offend me, son? I am proud that you are ambitious. But, truth be told, you cannot be as powerful as me. Do you know why?’

Kalanayaka shook his head unsurely.

‘What I’ve learnt from my life is that you cannot be powerful with just sorcery and brawn. True power comes from knowledge. I have the knowledge of many great things, things you cannot even fathom. And that makes me more powerful than you.’

Without answering, Kalanayaka thought, *What use is knowledge?*

As if on cue, Kalarakshasa answered, ‘Knowledge is the most potent weapon a person can have. Knowledge of your enemy is certain to lead to your enemy’s defeat. I have knowledge about Kalki. I have knowledge about the weapons that can be used to destroy him. So I am certain that I can defeat Kalki. It’s not because I am a skilled sorcerer, it’s because I know how Kalki can be defeated. It’s because I know the means to do so.’

Kalanayaka stared at Kalarakshasa, astonished. But before he could speak, Kalarakshasa added, ‘You are one of my weapons, Kalanayaka. You desire more power? I shall give it to you. Vanquish Kalki, and I shall give you all of India to rule over! You have my word.’

Kalanayaka was dumbstruck. As he gaped at his lord, Kalarakshasa waved his hand, dismissing him.

Kalanayaka bowed and left the chamber, his mind clouded with the dream of ruling over India. *I will kill Kalki!*

After Kalanayaka left, Bhairava turned to his lord. ‘Are you really going to let Kalanayaka kill Kalki? I thought you intended to kill him yourself!’

‘I am not going to let him kill Kalki, quite obviously. I will do that myself. I will follow Kalanayaka tomorrow. And when the moment comes, I will step in and kill Kalki! I won’t let my long wait be in vain!’

Bhairava nodded. ‘Then why did you make him such a promise?’

Kalarakshasa chuckled. ‘That promise will motivate him to put his soul into the battle. He will fight with all that he has. And that will be beneficial to me. He could eliminate Dweepa for me. And yes, I will keep my promise to him. I will give him Bharat, but after *I* finish Kalki.’



THIRTY-ONE

Two Months after the Great War of Kurukshetra, Dwapara Yuga

Krishna walked through the grove, towards the rivulet. He was happy that the Pandavas had won the Great Battle of Kurukshetra, but disliked the aftermath of the war. ‘Hated’ would be a more fitting word. He *strongly hated* the consequences of the bloody battle. Though evil had been defeated, Krishna knew it would resurface, stronger and more powerful than ever, in the coming ages.

I have been assured of it!

The thought sent a chill down his spine. Ever since the war, sleep had eluded him. He had known that the repercussions of the war wouldn’t be pleasant, but what he discovered was nothing short of horrifying. He’d realized that he would have to do as much as possible to help the Kalki avatar in the coming yuga. He knew he had about three to four decades to make arrangements, and was ensuring that he completed all his elaborate designs as soon as possible. Even now he was on his way to oversee the progress of one of the tasks he had undertaken to help Kalki.

Krishna could hear the sound of men at work as he approached the stream. The sight before him took his breath away. It was one to behold. The otherwise rampant river wasn’t flowing that afternoon; instead there was a gaping hole in the centre of the riverbed!

Maya, the one responsible for this astonishing feat, was standing at the bank, shouting instructions. A month ago, Krishna had summoned Maya to Dwarka from Indraprastha to start working on his first task. The lord had sincerely hoped that he would not have to commission that assignment. But he had weighed the consequences after the Great War and offered the task to Maya, for he was the best architect for the job, the only one who could execute his mission.

Spotting Krishna, Maya approached him, half-running. Krishna was about to ask him about the curious absence of water, when he saw his answer. Large rocks were placed across the stream, acting like walls and diversions. The stream had changed its course, and kept lashing against the rocks.

Krishna looked at the centre of the riverbed, where a large cubicle—in the dimensions of a spacious room—was being dug up. Workers were scooping the wet sand out and placing marble slabs around the circumference. The cavity was around ten to fifteen feet below the level of the riverbed.

‘Maya, why so deep down?’

‘To protect the room from being filled with water, my lord,’ the asura replied.

Krishna looked at him questioningly.

‘A set of stairs will lead to the room below. At the top of the stairs will be the door to this underwater chamber. When the door is opened, water will gush in, of course. But to keep the room from flooding, I will build a series of drainer outlets that will border the staircase. These vents will send the water back to the river through drainpipes.’

Krishna scratched his chin, pondering for a few moments. Then he asked, ‘Wouldn’t the water flow back into the room through these very outlets?’

Maya smiled. ‘No, my lord. These vents will be covered by lids, which will be pressure-sensitive and open only towards the outside. So pressure from above will open the outlets. And the water will flow only from inside the cubicle to the river outside, and not the other way around.’

Impressed, Krishna murmured words of praise. ‘And how do I open the door?’

Maya motioned Krishna to walk up the bank with him. They strolled past a row of trees. ‘The door is to be opened and shut with a button. Pressing the button will open it, pressing it back again will shut it.’

Krishna nodded as they stopped at a tree that was the farthest down the row.

‘Since the room is a secret, I will hide the lever within *this* tree. Reach around the trunk, and you will feel the outline of a circle.’

Krishna ran his hand over the bark, around the trunk. His fingers moved slowly, until they brushed an engraving of the circle. It felt like someone had inscribed it on the bark.

‘I will inscribe a similar circle on the front too, aligned with the button behind,’ the asura went on. ‘It will mark this tree as the key for the room.’

Krishna was satisfied with this method.

‘I haven’t prepared the lever yet,’ Maya added, ‘but I will soon, and embed it within this tree.’

‘What about the secret storage spaces?’

Maya smiled broadly. ‘I will work on them myself, my lord. But, yes, based on the requirements you specified, may I request you to lend me your flute for a couple of days?’

Krishna readily agreed. ‘Keep it for as long as you need, my friend.’ He brought out the wooden flute from his waistband and handed it to the architect.

Maya accepted it respectfully, bowing to Krishna and touching the flute to his forehead. He stashed it carefully in his bag.

‘Please visit me two days from now, my lord, for I’ll be setting up the lock then and I need you for that.’

The lord smiled to indicate that this was agreeable.

Krishna, remembering something suddenly, motioned Maya to wait for a moment. Slipping his hand inside his waistband, he brought out a conch shell and gave it to him.

‘Ah ... Of course, my lord,’ Maya said, accepting the locket. ‘I shall return it to you when we meet next.’

‘Maya, your work is truly impressive,’ Krishna remarked.

The architect beamed with pride. He bowed, and the two ambled back to the stream.



THIRTY-TWO

‘Here it is,’ Anirudh told Dweepa, his hand pointing to the conch shell engraving on the tree.

Dweepa hurriedly came up behind him and touched the symbol, his hand caressing the bark, feeling his lord’s divine touch across the centuries. He looked up at the skies and whispered a prayer.

‘This has been here for so many years, yet I never noticed it!’ Dweepa croaked, his voice full of regret and disbelief.

Anirudh patted Dweepa’s back affectionately. The sage took a deep breath to control his emotions.

‘I know my lord was all-powerful. But ... how could this symbol have survived here in the great outdoors for so many centuries?’

Anirudh looked at the sage and replied, ‘Mother Nature respects the wishes of those who respect her. She treasured Lord Krishna’s wish because he appreciated her and held her in high regard.’

Dweepa turned to observe Anirudh, startled. Sometimes the young man’s wisdom really took him by surprise. He stepped away from the tree and bowed slightly to Anirudh, indicating that they had to proceed in the direction of the rivulet.

Anirudh and Dweepa had left Chennai by an early morning flight and reached the latter’s house by noon. Both had been too excited to eat, so they had immediately headed to the woods. Anirudh had led the way, filled with eagerness, as he’d relied on his memory to locate the tree with the conch shell symbol. Now Anirudh and Dweepa turned their attention to the sound

of burbling water. They quickened their pace, their excitement brimming over.

After walking for some time, they reached the stream. It rushed on madly, and would be impossible to cross on foot without being swept away by the currents. Anirudh looked at Dweepa worriedly, running his fingers through his unruly hair. He needed to find a way. His mind raced as he paced up and down the bank, thinking of how to cross the river. He looked down the length of the waterbody, hoping to find a raft or a boat. But he saw none. Then, suddenly, he remembered how Krishna had slackened the river's flow in his dream!

'You remember I'd told you how Krishna slowed down the river currents by waving his hand over the stream. Can you try that, Sage Dweepa?' Anirudh muttered, as curious as he was desperate.

Dweepa smiled and gave him a nod. Then, looking around cautiously to see if they were being watched, he stepped into the river, the cool water embracing his ankles. Holding up his arm in front of him, he started slowly waving his hand in the air, as if softly caressing the water. His eyes were shut, as if he were in deep meditation. In response, the stream, too, calmed down. Gradually the flow of the water changed to a lazy drift.

Anirudh stared in awe, secretly hoping that one day he, too, would be able to achieve such mastery over the elements. Dweepa smiled at Anirudh reassuringly, as if he'd read his thoughts, and told him to step into the water. Holding hands, they crossed the rivulet easily, the water coming up to their knees.

On the other bank, Anirudh squinted at the woods up ahead, trying to identify something. His rolled-up jeans were heavy with the weight of the water, but he was too excited to be bothered. Suddenly, he let out a small smile. He'd recognized the landscape from his dreams, and knew that the tree with the big circle inscribed on its bark was on his right. It had to be.

'If we had approached the woods from the opposite end,' Anirudh spoke, pointing ahead, 'then the tree would have been on our left, and we wouldn't have had to slow down the rivulet's currents.'

Dweepa agreed. Not wasting a moment, they half-ran to the grove to their right, frantically searching for the tree. Minutes passed, but without luck. Anirudh grew agitated and let out a groan. Something was not right.

'Maybe it's deeper in the woods. New trees may have grown ... hiding it from view? It's been centuries ...' Dweepa suggested.

Anirudh was too annoyed to say anything, so he just followed Dweepa. They entered a thicket and split up. The trees here were dense, and barely any light filtered in through the canopy. Anirudh looked to the left, while the sage went further right. The earthy smell of moss hung in the air, dulling the senses, and it was so perfectly quiet that even the snapping of a twig could not be missed.

‘Sage Dweepaaaa!’ a voice rang out, shattering the silence.

Dweepa ran towards the source and found Anirudh leaning against a tree, his strong arms wrapped around the trunk. From behind, the sage observed, the boy looked exactly like Krishna, barring his lord’s long hair—his swarthy body gleamed with sweat, and his lean figure displayed a certain grace even in times like this. As if on cue, Anirudh turned and gave Dweepa a brilliant smile. The sage returned it and walked up to inspect the tree bark. He closed his eyes in joy the moment he saw it—the big circle!

Anirudh grinned and, placing both hands on the trunk, aligned his left palm—on the etched circle—to the right palm around the circumference, directly behind it. Once in line, he pressed the fingers of his right hand into the bark. But it didn’t budge. Anxious, he frowned at the sage.

Dweepa looked at Anirudh earnestly and nudged him to try again.

Anirudh took a deep breath and, channelling all the strength he could muster, applied pressure on the bark. It slid inside! He fist-pumped the air and let out a scream of joy as Dweepa laughed.

They headed back to the stream expectantly, and stood stunned at the view of the gaping hole in the centre, with the water rushing into it. It was just like the scene in Anirudh’s dream! Dweepa and Anirudh held hands and stepped into the rivulet, which was still flowing gently. They approached the hole and peered in, a little hesitant, a little eager. It was dark, and they couldn’t see what was inside.

Anirudh turned to Dweepa. ‘It’s time,’ he said with resolve. He let go of Dweepa’s hand, inhaled deeply and jumped in, just like he had done when he was Krishna in the dream.

He braced himself for a long drop but reached the ground faster than he had anticipated. He landed with a thud on a hard floor, but somehow it didn’t hurt. The surface was cold, wet and slippery. A damp smell filled his nostrils as the river water kept pouring in. Anirudh exhaled, coughing, as he stood up and steadied himself. His clothes, soaking wet, clung to his frame. He looked around—all he could perceive was darkness. It was pitch-black.

Anirudh called out to Dweepa and told him that it was safe to jump. Spreading his arms wide, he broke the sage's fall. Dweepa mumbled his thanks and straightened up, squinting at the darkness. He brought out a torch from his satchel and turned it on.

'You came prepared?' Anirudh asked, smiling at his teacher's resourcefulness.

'Yes, based on what you'd described, I guessed we would need a source of light.'

Dweepa flashed the torchlight at the low ceiling above. A large stone disc was set in it, with an iron handle. The two looked at each other.

'Looks like the door. Shall we close it?' he asked hopefully, shivering a little as the cold water drenched his body.

Dweepa nodded. He, too, was feeling uncomfortable, and was getting anxious about the chamber filling up with water.

'Oxygen ...' Anirudh asked. 'Wouldn't we be cutting off the air supply?'

Dweepa pondered a bit and then said, 'If we need fresh air, we shall open the door.'

Anirudh agreed and pushed the handle, and the disc slid into its place easily, shutting the hole and stemming the waterfall. They both sighed, relief filling them.

Dweepa now flashed the torch at the ground beneath them and then down the length of a narrow corridor ahead. The passageway was only about five feet long. Anirudh and Dweepa locked eyes, eyebrows raised. They walked to the edge and saw a short flight of descending steps. The sage gestured to Anirudh, and they climbed down gingerly, the gurgle of the water growing louder. By torchlight, they saw water escaping the chamber through drainers on either side of the staircase. Exchanging admiring glances at the ingenuity of the outlets, they reached the landing. This level was dry, albeit also chilly.

On the marble wall to their right hung a lamp filled with wax. Dweepa peered at the wick and, without a word, handed the torch to Anirudh and brought out a box of matches. He was about to strike one, when Anirudh placed his hand on the sage's arm, shaking his head.

'I'm not sure, but doesn't fire use up oxygen?'

Dweepa sighed. 'Yes, it does. You're right, Anirudh.'

'So let's use it if the need arises, then?' Anirudh said. 'Let's go with the torch for now.'

Dweepa nodded, fiddling with his bag to keep the matchbox inside. In the meantime, Anirudh flashed the torch around this room. It was a small boxlike chamber, empty. The two looked at each other, anxiety lurking in their eyes. Their thoughts echoed one another: *Where are the treasures hidden?*

The cold room was making Anirudh shiver a little, and his hands shook, the torchlight flickering on the wall right in front of them. He stopped still. He had noticed something. He waved at his teacher, motioning with his eyes. Carved on the wall was some sort of design, and what seemed like a hole next to it. Anirudh went closer and studied the etching, tracing the shape with his slender fingers.

It was that of a conch shell!

Dweepa's eyes asked the next steps of his student. But Anirudh's were shut. Breathing slowly, he was thinking about the purpose of the hole in the wall. *The symbol of a conch shell! Krishna came here to hide the locket ... that I know. But what is the hole for?* After contemplating for a few minutes—or what seemed like ages to Dweepa—Anirudh opened his eyes. Turning, he stared at the broken conch-shell locket hanging from Dweepa's neck.

'Please give me that locket, Sage.'

Dweepa unquestioningly took off one of his most prized possessions and handed it to him.

Memorizing its mould, Anirudh went on. 'In my dreams, I came here to hide three things: the circular locket, the broken conch-shell locket and my flute. But the question is—why did I give you the other half of the locket? Was there another reason besides it being your identifying mark?'

Dweepa looked at Anirudh, shaking his head in confusion.

Silence followed. The chamber was still, and no sound could be heard except the echo of their deep breathing.

'*This locket,*' Anirudh broke the peace, laughing softly and glancing from the hole in the wall to the pendant in his palm, 'will lead us to its other half hidden here! *That is why I gave it to you!* And that's why I told you to keep it with you always! The key was right here all along ... How foolish I have been!'

Dweepa gasped, touching his neck where the locket had been moments ago. In his surprise at the sequence of events, he couldn't utter anything except a short, mumbled prayer under his breath.

Feeling confident, Anirudh gently inserted the locket into the hole beside the symbol. But he felt it hit a dead end in less than an inch. He furrowed his brow, trying again. Beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. Steadying his breathing, and ever-so-careful to not break the locket, he slowly pressed it into the small gap. To his delight, it slid inside easily now. Happiness washed over the two, as did a keen curiosity.

Anirudh continued pushing the locket inside as far as it would go, when, all of a sudden, the carving of the conch shell protruded from the wall! They both stepped back, gasping. Dweepa flashed torchlight at the wall, and they realized that it wasn't the symbol that had jutted out, but the marble slab it was carved on. It was constructed almost like a marble drawer, mounted on marble extensions. Anirudh smiled admiringly; the mechanism was quite simple. The further the locket was pushed inside, the more the slab poked out. The 'dead end' inside the hole wasn't one after all—it was a button or a key, which had to be pushed to slide out the slab. Behind Anirudh, Dweepa marvelled at the extraordinary design.

The two stepped forward, holding their breath, and peeped into the small cavity behind the slab. Resting in the centre, glowing milky white in the torchlight, was the other half of the conch-shell locket—the body whorl. Anirudh took it out carefully and held it in his palm, running a finger over the cold, hard shell. The pendant was resplendent, and had perfect spirals.

Then Anirudh slowly pushed the slab back inside, and Dweepa's locket fell out of the hole and into his cupped hand. He held the two halves against each other—it was a perfect fit!

Anirudh and Dweepa couldn't wipe the smiles off their faces. They had actually retrieved Lord Krishna's conch-shell locket from the depths of the river! Dweepa squeezed his student's shoulder encouragingly. 'What next?' he asked.

Anirudh took the torch from Dweepa's hand and shined it at the wall to his left, disappointed that no other clue could be found. He sighed and moved to the wall on their right, the light following. He turned away in seconds, but had to do a double take ... There was something on the marble wall. Dweepa watched Anirudh as he inched closer, his mouth dry. At about waist height were three small gaps, the size of keyholes.

He examined the holes: two big and one comparatively smaller. The bigger openings were meant for the conchshell halves, Anirudh understood instantly. But the third one intrigued him.

‘The flute?’ Dweepa suggested.

Anirudh shrugged. ‘Probably ... But where is the flute?’ he whispered. With doubt written all over his face, he turned to the opposite wall and looked at it again, carefully. ‘Did I miss something in my excitement?’ he asked himself.

He shone the incandescent light across the polished wall, slowly this time, covering every inch. And there it was right before him: two keyholes.

Anirudh moved quickly, by now desperate to unravel the secrets of his past. As he wiped the dust off the wall with his hands, his eyes were caught by another something, just above the openings. A carving—that of a flute!

By turns laughing and panting with anticipation, the two silently registered exactly what they needed to do next. The student handed the torch to the teacher, who focused the beam of light on the two holes. Anirudh inserted a locket in each keyhole and slowly pushed them inside. Instinctively, the two looked at the symbol above the gaps. The result was instant: the marble slab that bore the carved flute protruded jerkily from the wall. This drawer was much wider and even a bit thicker than the one that held the conch-shell locket. With a final push, the slab juttied out completely. Dweepa flashed the torch beam inside it, and his breath caught in his throat.

Lord Krishna’s flute!

‘My flute ... It’s the same as the one from my dreams!’ Anirudh whispered, reaching inside the drawer. He ran his trembling fingers over the instrument’s holes and its polished wooden surface, and his dreams came rushing back to him, flooding his mind. Awestruck by the significance of this moment, he breathed deeply, wrapping his hand around its body. As he held it with the right of ownership, prickly goosebumps broke out down his neck and arms.

After giving Anirudh a few moments, Dweepa respectfully held out his hands for the flute. Closing his eyes, he touched it to his forehead. Anirudh smiled; warmth flooded his whole being.

Pushing the slab back into the wall and collecting the two lockets, Dweepa and Anirudh reined in their ecstasy and returned their attention to the wall behind them, the one with the three holes. Having learnt from his latest attempt, Anirudh wiped the wall clean with his wet T-shirt—he knew there had to be something inscribed on it. And he was right! Gone

unnoticed before, an etched symbol stood in relief above the three keyholes. It was a circular carving—for the circular locket!

Anirudh's heartbeat quickened—this would be the ultimate find! He had been obsessing about the locket ever since he'd seen it in his dreams. Anirudh tousled his hair, eager yet nervous. He had to steady his nerves before trying anything.

Finally calm and ready, he placed the two lockets in the two gaping holes while Sage Dweepa inserted the flute into the third, smaller, one. Unlike the two others, the third hole wasn't blocked on the inside—there was no button, and it was a clear passage. And they were both surprised when Dweepa thrust the flute inside with ease. At least a quarter of its length was in the hole. Now Anirudh pushed the lockets inside without applying much pressure, but he met a wall inside both the holes, which, with force, was not difficult to break through. The marble slab above finally jutted out. It was square-shaped and about five inches to a side.

Dweepa shone the torch beam at the slab, but it was a flat block of stone. There was no compartment there. Anirudh observed the thickness of the tile—about three inches.

'The locket is inside the slab.' He was certain of this.

Dweepa studied the slab, but he was met with disappointment. Then he flashed the light behind the marble block, straight at the cavity that lay behind it. The sage noticed that it was a wall instead of a cavity, with a small hole in its centre. He brought this to Anirudh's attention.

Anirudh looked at the hole. It was the same girth as the flute, but there was no way they could fit the instrument there. The slab was in the way. Intrigued by the inexplicable presence of that hole, Anirudh reached in and touched the back of the slab. His hunch proven correct, he felt a gap there, corresponding to the hole in the wall.

'Even the slab has a hole. It's directly in front of the one in the wall,' Anirudh told Dweepa.

Dweepa's eyes widened. 'Are you sure?' he asked a little too loudly.

Anirudh was surprised to see the sage so eager. He nodded a yes.

Dweepa motioned Anirudh to approach the flute. 'You remember the dreams in which you were playing the flute?'

Anirudh snorted. 'How can I forget? I've had many such dreams ... I've seen the dream so many times that now I even know how to play the melody!'

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course, yes,’ he said simply.

‘Play it on the flute then.’

Anirudh looked at the flute and then at Dweepa. ‘What? Why? But it’s still inside the wall!’ He pointed to the instrument jutting out of the hole.

‘Just play it.’

Abandoning all his questions, Anirudh dropped to his knees, so that his face was on level with the flute, and brought his lips close to the instrument. Shutting his eyes, he recalled the movement of his fingers on the holes of the flute and copied the same sequence while blowing air into the tube. The sound that came out was captivating, emanating shrilly and reverberating behind the marble walls. It was as if time itself had stopped. The melody was like a lullaby, and Sage Dweepa’s heart ached just listening to it.

After a few glorious moments, they heard a distinct click from the marble slab. Anirudh’s eyes snapped open, and he instantly stopped playing. A lid had sprung ajar on the slab. He got to his feet and looked inside by the steady torchlight.

A circular locket, dazzlingly white. It was glowing bright and looked absolutely magnificent, like it were the most beautiful and precious jewel in the whole world!

Anirudh took out the pendant and placed it on his palm; it was pleasantly heavy. He glanced at Dweepa, who was leaning in with a hand to his mouth, his eyes fixed on the locket. Anirudh now noticed something else inside the slab, and fished out a folded palm leaf. He straightened it gingerly to see a few Sanskrit words written in an elegant hand:

Greetings, O Kalki!

If you are reading this, then I suppose you have met Sage Dweepa and the plan is proceeding as I have devised it.

Kalki, the locket you hold in your hands is no ordinary jewel. It is the Kaustubha *ratna*! And it is your key to unlock the biggest weapon in the whole universe. Protect this locket at all costs, and make sure it never leaves you.

You have done well.

Yours,

Krishna

Anirudh and Dweepa were shaken to their core by what they had just read. The sage's eyes were brimming with tears as he regarded Anirudh with nothing short of awe. Finally, their quest was complete. With the help of age-old instructions, they had found what they had been searching for! Anirudh looked at the locket. The mystical object was shining as brightly as the silvery moon. He offered it to Dweepa, who touched it to his forehead and put it inside the bag.

Speechlessly, Anirudh pushed the marble slab back into the wall, caught the two lockets that emerged from their holes, retrieved the flute and handed them all to Dweepa. The sage carefully kept each item inside his bag.

Anirudh smiled. 'Shall we leave now?'



THIRTY-THREE

Anirudh and Dweepa were back in the woods, making their way to the hut. Their soaking wet clothes were drying on their backs by the rays of the blistering sun.

When Anirudh had pulled open the large stone door of the underground chamber, the river water had gushed back in, drenching them. He had got out first and then helped Dweepa up. They'd headed to the tree, and Anirudh had pressed the bark behind the big circle to close the crater in the middle of the river, before wading to the opposite shore. Once they had crossed over, Dweepa had restored the force of the water.

Exhausted from their adventure, they decided to eat before discussing the events of the day. But as they turned to the house, they found a surprise waiting for them. A strapping man, wearing long black robes and holding a staff in his hand with the miniature skull of a bull at its tip, greeted them.

Before Dweepa even had the time to react, the man sneered broadly and tossed Dweepa in the air. The sage landed heavily on the ground, groaning in pain.

The robed man now looked at an alarmed Anirudh. '*Kalki!* Finally we meet! By Goddess Kali's grace, I shall finish you today!'

Fear gripped Anirudh's heart, paralysing him. *How does this man know that I am Kalki?*

The man in black waved his staff at Anirudh, and a strong gust of wind hit him. Anirudh was knocked off his feet, and he crashed into a tree. He slumped face down on to the ground, too tired and shocked to move.

But before he could strike again, Dweepa had recovered, and he stood up to face their attacker. The sage recognized him now. He was the same man who had attacked him in Tamil Nadu!

‘Kalanayaka!’

The sorcerer cracked an evil smile, ready to brandish his staff again. Dweepa took a couple of steps towards Kalanayaka, studying his enemy. ‘You seem to have grown more powerful,’ the sage commented, buying some time for Anirudh to get to his feet. He glanced at the boy, who was slowly hoisting himself up. ‘What do you want, Kalanayaka?’ Dweepa went on.

‘I want the lives of Kalki and you, Dweepa!’

The sage let out a cold laugh and sent out a series of attacks, hurling balls of fire and water at him. Kalanayaka calmly deflected them all with a mere flick of his hand, and launched powerful counter-attacks—strong jets of fire and sand headed towards Dweepa from the left and the right respectively. Dweepa was surprised by the technique and speed of the attacks, as during their previous encounter the sorcerer had not seemed as mighty. Dweepa conjured up waves of fire to devour the jets.

Anirudh was watching the duel through half-closed eyes. But something was changing in him, compelling him to move. He felt all his senses tingling. He felt anger. *Dweepa needs me!* A strange energy coursed through his body.

Anirudh got up suddenly, and summoned all his strength to launch an offensive against Kalanayaka. But the sorcerer spotted him from the corner of his eye. Even as the two attacked him, the robed man successfully dodged both spells and hurled a blow towards Kalki.

Anirudh fell to his knees within a fraction of a second.

This gave Kalanayaka enough time to focus on Dweepa. The sage and the sorcerer exchanged a fierce volley of fire, earth and sand, aggressively fighting one another. Both seemed to have met their match, as they escaped each other’s attacks with minor scratches and burns and neither gave up. *He is well trained!* Kalanayaka acknowledged his worthy opponent.

Meanwhile, Anirudh recovered and, getting up, launched a series of air punches aimed at Kalanayaka’s gut. With a seething glare, the sorcerer waved them off and punched Kalki squarely in the chest. Anirudh was pushed back a few feet. Taking advantage of the distraction provided by

Anirudh, Dweepa aimed a torrent of fiery energy at Kalanayaka, who reeled from this unexpected attack.

Not to be thwarted, though, the robed man took a step back and prepared himself for the next onslaught from Dweepa, who now had an exultant air about him for he thought he had finally overpowered his opponent. However, a sudden change came over the sorcerer. He calmly deflected all attacks as if they were child's play, startling Dweepa. He then focused on his own assault, hurling spears made of earth at the sage. But Dweepa was putting up a tough fight, simultaneously evading the spears and conjuring boulders to launch at the sorcerer.

Several feet away, Anirudh shook off his shock and steadied himself. He was seething with rage at himself for not being able to perform energy conversions and assist his teacher. He gaped at the two enemies fighting, but it was impossible to guess who would win. Fire, water, earth, air—he saw boulders and spears of all elements being exchanged between the skilled opponents. It looked like a divine dance of destruction! The forest floor was charred as well as flooded, the bark of the surrounding trees was smouldering lightly, leaves were burnt to a crisp, rocks were piled up and mounds of sand lay scattered like sunlight.

As he watched their combat, awestruck, he heard a voice that broke his trance. 'Anirudh, you can defeat him!'

He looked around for the source of the sound and saw a familiar figure standing near a tree to his left. The grey eyes, the broken and wounded skin, the tattered green saree ...

'*Bhoomidevi!*' Anirudh whispered.

He quickly turned to Dweepa and Kalanayaka, but they seemed oblivious to her presence.

'All you need to do is believe. *Believe* that you can perform energy conversion, and you will be able to do it,' said Bhoomidevi, determination in her eyes.

Anirudh looked at her and back at the duelling figures. He took a deep breath and stepped forward.

'You can do it, Anirudh!' Bhoomidevi whispered.

Inching closer to Kalanayaka, Anirudh conjured up a gust of energy and imagined it was a blaze. But the fire failed to appear. He stared at Bhoomidevi helplessly.

'*Believe!*' she breathed yet again.

Anirudh glanced back at the fighters, their arms and faces streaked with bleeding wounds and deep gashes. He saw Kalanayaka launching a gigantic ball of energy towards Dweepa. The pulsating ball, fuelled by the sorcerer's rage, hurtled towards its target. The sage braced himself and met the attack with open palms. He had collected energy in his hands, and pushed back. But he found the ball to be so forceful that it pressed down on him, making him stagger. As he skidded backwards, he tripped on a stone and fell to his knees. But refusing to relent, with all the power he could summon, he turned the mass of energy upwards and launched it into the sky, where it shattered among the purple clouds. With ragged breaths, Dweepa kept himself upright. All his energy had drained out of him.

Kalanayaka waved his staff as he yelled, 'You think you can defeat a Kalabakshaka? A small, insignificant man like you cannot kill me, Dweepa!' He jerked his staff towards the sage and out came three towering waves: air, earth and fire.

Anirudh stared at the terrible formation, horrified. The sage, still on his knees after fending off the gigantic ball, was trying to get to his feet while deflecting the oncoming assault. Anirudh couldn't bear it any longer. His teacher was completely battered—he was too weak to go on! He knew this was the end. That Kalanayaka's attack was going to kill Dweepa.

'You can defeat Kalanayaka! Believe it! Believe that you can convert energy!' Bhoomidevi pleaded, her grey eyes now shimmering with unshed tears.

I cannot let Sage Dweepa die! The sage had taught him so much. Dweepa was his friend, his guide and ally. Anirudh couldn't let Dweepa's efforts turn to dust. Vengeance filled Anirudh's body, stirring him into action.

'You can save Dweepa, Anirudh!' Bhoomidevi cried.

As if triggered by her voice, Anirudh dashed to Dweepa's side while conjuring up two walls of energy between themselves and the sorcerer. Kalanayaka's oncoming projectiles bounced off the sturdy screen.

Kalanayaka was astonished.

No, not walls of energy ... These are walls of earth and water! Anirudh willed firmly.

As he shielded his teacher, he saw his walls turn into sheets of earth and water. He had believed in the transformation, and it had happened! As if he was meant to achieve this all along!

The sage, who had collapsed to the ground, opened his eyes slightly and saw the most heart-stopping spectacle. Anirudh's wall of earth and water hit Kalanayaka's shield of air and pushed back. An eerie silence fell over them before the walls collided and the sorcerer's sheet of air noisily burst into invisible smithereens, shattering the stillness. The barrage of earth sent by Kalanayaka also met its end when it crashed against Anirudh's. Now Anirudh's wall of earth, having spent its energy in breaking two walls, melted away. The screen of fire, conjured up by Kalanayaka, and Anirudh's wall of water slammed into each other and dissolved into thin air, clouds of vapour obscuring everyone's vision.

Anirudh turned to Dweepa and, panicking, saw blood oozing from his teacher's mouth. His eyes were now shut, and his face was pale. The student placed his palm on the sage's chest to confirm that his heart was still beating. Yes ... he was still alive! Assured about Dweepa's safety, Anirudh faced Kalanayaka again. The air had cleared.

He stood up and walked through the thin, dwindling mist. The sorcerer took a step back, suddenly unsure. He saw Anirudh's flaming red eyes, which looked like churning oceans of blood. He was focused on his enemy's defeat and infused with energy and anger. Afraid but unwilling to give up, Kalanayaka brought down a sizzling ball of fire, but Anirudh waved it aside as if it were nothing. The Kalki avatar had finally realized his powers of belief—that he could will anything into being! He had imagined the ball of fire to be a mere wisp of energy and, believing so, had brushed it away.

The sorcerer was stunned, but he recovered quickly to air-punch Kalki in the gut, which sent him back a few steps. But Anirudh dug his heels in to stop his fall. If it were at all possible, he became even more enraged. Bellowing a deep cry of fury, Anirudh stepped forward. Channelling the energy of the woods, he diverted it at Kalanayaka's abdomen and face. The robed figure doubled up with pain.

Now great fear reflected in Kalanayaka's eyes as he saw Kalki approaching him. Gathering a huge mass of energy in his right fist, Kalki propelled it into the air with a roar. The blast of wind knocked Kalanayaka off his feet, and he landed on his back, several feet away, groaning in misery. But he wasn't going to let the pain win. He *had* to finish Kalki, even though he had been caught off guard by the avatar's strength and skill.

Kalanayaka saw Kalki still gaining on him with every stride, his eyes fearfully bloody. He calmed himself down before brutally striking Kalki with his staff. But it seemed like nothing affected the man facing him, who deflected the onslaught with a flick of his fingers. Now the sorcerer's fright was replaced by anger as he grew furious upon seeing Kalki defend his best attacks so easily. So he decided to use his special weapon once again; this time, against Kalki himself.

Kalanayaka summoned his fury and launched pellets of air, fire and earth against Kalki. Deftly dodging the hailstorm of the elements, Anirudh joined his hands together, pointed them to Kalanayaka's feet and then pulled his palms apart. The earth shook and finally split open under Kalanayaka's feet, and he fell right in.

Trapped in the crack, he screamed as he tried to wriggle out, 'No, Kalki! You cannot defeat me! I have offered many an animal sacrifice to Goddess Kali. She's with *me* ... With her by my side, you can NEVER defeat me!' Saying so, Kalanayaka levitated in the air, balancing on the tip of his staff. He laughed menacingly.

But Anirudh's mind stayed on Kalanayaka's words. *Animal sacrifices? This man has sacrificed innocent animals?*

Enraged, Anirudh recalled Dweepa's lesson on energy moulding, during which he had shaped a ball of energy above his palm using an invisible hand. He inhaled deeply and imagined an invisible hand above Kalanayaka. With his intent infused with rage, he raised his own hand and brought it down with full force.

Kalanayaka was shoved, as if by the innocent air, right into the ground, like a nail that had been hammered down! His staff fell from his grip and rolled away from the sorcerer, who was now buried waist-deep in earth, a dumbfounded look on his face.

Anirudh stomped forward and picked up Kalanayaka's staff. 'Your power lies in this staff, right?'

Kalanayaka's face showed nothing but terror. '*Please, no! No ... no ... no ...!*'

He watched as Kalki held out the staff in front of him with both hands. Then, raising his right leg, he brought down the staff on his thigh with all his might and broke it in two.

'*Noooo ...!*' Kalanayaka felt as though someone had ripped out his heart and sucked out the life from his body.

Anirudh tossed the splintered pieces to one side and turned away.

‘I have been betrayed by you ... the gods once again!’ Kalanayaka screamed through his tears.

These words caught Anirudh’s attention. He stepped back, and his eyes fell on a large boulder that lay a few feet away from him. Pulling it towards him, effortlessly through the air, he perched on it, facing Kalanayaka.

‘We are going to have a little chat.’

At that moment, he had stopped thinking like a man. He had started acting like the god that he was.



THIRTY-FOUR

Anirudh was furious. ‘You said “once again”.’
Kalanayaka shot a bitter look at Kalki through his tears.

Anirudh rolled his eyes and repeated, “I have been betrayed by the gods once again.” That’s what you said, correct? I’m asking you why you said “once again”? When have the gods betrayed you before?’ He paused, realizing that it was the wrong question. ‘*Why* do you say that the gods have betrayed you? What makes you think so?’

Kalanayaka took a deep breath and simply glared at Kalki, as if he would never answer any of his questions. But the words just tumbled from his mouth. ‘The first time the gods betrayed me was when I was just a little boy ...’ The sorcerer went on to narrate his experiences as an abandoned child, roaming the streets as a beggar and getting beaten up and mistreated by the shelter home owner. ‘Children are supposed to be God’s gift ... they have a special place in his heart, right? How I cried ... I cried every day, begging the gods to show some kindness, put us out of our misery. We were innocents ... Why didn’t you protect us? Why were we left at the mercy of that man, who always took from us and never gave us even an ounce of love?’

Anirudh looked at Kalanayaka’s pitiful face, scratched his forehead and wondered about the role of God in the affairs of men. *Greed. One of the terrible sins that consume this world ...*

He turned to Kalanayaka. ‘It wasn’t God who betrayed you, but man. I blessed man with enough knowledge for him to be able to differentiate

between good and evil. But if man wishes to succumb to greed, I can't stop him. I *won't* stop him ... Not until he crosses the limit.'

At this, rage bubbled inside Kalanayaka.

'And I won't protect you ... I can understand why you are angry with me. But I won't shoulder the blame for the acts of man.'

Kalanayaka flailed about, his face contorting with anger as Anirudh went on.

'Also, I won't forgive you ...'

'You won't forgive me?'

Kalki glowered as he answered. 'Even though you are blessed with knowledge, you fail to use it. Look at yourself! You have become so evil that you don't even recognize the difference between right and wrong.'

Kalanayaka spat, 'I do know what is right and what is wrong. I learnt it a long time ago.'

Anirudh's blood boiled upon hearing those words. 'Do you?' he yelled. 'Is sacrificing animals the right thing to do? Answer me!' The sky crackled with lightning, and thunder resounded through the woods. It had suddenly become dark.

Kalanayaka blurted, fear evident in his voice, 'I-I s-sacrificed animals to satiate Goddess Kali. If that's what it takes to appease her, then I will perform not one, but a thousand sacrifices!'

Anirudh gnashed his teeth. Charged with fury, he effortlessly generated a ball of energy and clasped Kalanayaka's throat with an invisible hand. Almost choking him, Anirudh let go in the nick of time. The sorcerer was still alive, gasping and sputtering and struggling for air. Despite his struggle, Kalanayaka's eyes never left Kalki's.

Anirudh asked in a cold voice, 'Did Goddess Kali tell you that she wanted sacrifices to be made in her name? Has any god ever told man that they need sacrifices to be satiated?'

Kalanayaka remained silent, but he slowly shook his head, as if pressed to answer by an invisible force.

'Sacrificing animals is man's own assumption about what the gods want. Man was never asked to do so ...' Anirudh paused. 'Do you know of Ravana, the king of Lanka?'

Kalanayaka murmured yes. He knew all there was to know about the rakshasa king.

‘Then you must be aware that Ravana once tried to sacrifice his head to Lord Brahma. His tenth head, if I am correct. And that Brahma stopped him before he could do so?’

Kalanayaka nodded, curious to find out where this was heading.

‘Lord Brahma cared so much about living beings that he forbade Ravana from sacrificing his head. So can you imagine how the gods must feel about the slaughter of innocent animals under the false pretext of devotees receiving benediction?’

Anirudh hopped off the boulder and walked up to Kalanayaka. ‘You sacrificed animals to Goddess Kali?’ he asked stonily. ‘Did she tell you that she would support you if you offered up helpless souls to her?’

Kalanayaka blinked at Kalki, doubt flashing in his eyes.

‘You just assumed that she would. And when I defeated you today, you thought Goddess Kali had betrayed you?’

The sorcerer remained silent.

‘Am I right?’ Kalki asked, squatting down to face Kalanayaka, his voice a whisper.

Kalanayaka was taken aback. He raised his eyes to meet Kalki’s fiery gaze. It sent shivers down his spine. In fact, he felt like his whole body had been dipped in freezing cold water. Hesitantly, he mumbled a yes.

Anirudh said, ‘Goddess Kali didn’t betray you, Kalanayaka. Your actions betrayed you. You betrayed yourself! How can you be so foolish? You killed her creation and offered it up to her—and for that you want her favour? You offered up innocent animals in the hope of becoming powerful enough to kill me. Do you think it worked? *Could* it have worked?’

The sorcerer’s eyes had been opened, and he wordlessly hung his head in shame.

‘It’s not just you, Kalanayaka. Crores of people live with the misconception that offering sacrifices to the gods will appease them. They just don’t get it! They are slaughtering the child as a sacrifice to their parent. Don’t you see how ridiculous that is?’

Kalanayaka nodded, but didn’t dare look up. Anirudh lifted Kalanayaka’s chin and forced him to look into his face for what seemed like aeons to the sorcerer. Then Anirudh got up and, stepping back, levitated the boulder towards Kalanayaka.

Dweepa had drifted back to consciousness by now. He watched the scene before his eyes. He was certain that Kalki was about to kill Kalanayaka

with the rock. He could not let that happen! Summoning the last ounce of strength in his body, the sage pushed Kalanayaka deeper into the earth. He conjured up a huge fire at the spot where Kalanayaka had been, but left the sorcerer unscathed, cocooning him in a protective shield. Then he yanked the boulder out of Anirudh's control and set it down on the blaze.

Underground, Kalanayaka lay senseless.

Now that his rage had dwindled, Anirudh was aghast at what had just happened. He stumbled backwards, unaware that Dweepa had only created the illusion of Kalanayaka's death. *Wha-at happened? How ... how did this happen?*

Having staged Kalanayaka's demise, Dweepa feebly called out, 'Kalki ...' before slipping into unconsciousness.

Hearing the sage's hoarse voice, Anirudh recovered from his shock and rushed over. He shook Dweepa and tried to rouse him. But the sage didn't respond. Anirudh hurriedly scooped him up and carried him into the safety of the house.

A few feet away, from behind a tree, a cloaked man had been watching all that had just transpired in the woods. He was upset that Kalanayaka had been burnt alive inside the pit. Rather, he was shocked. He couldn't fathom how Kalki—an avatar who couldn't boast of any powers yet—had been able to defend himself and attack Kalanayaka! He thought it wise to return to his palace and mull over his next move.

Kalki might gain all his powers soon. He is much more prepared than we had known.

Furious with himself for having underestimated Kalki, he walked away from Dweepa's hut, his red robes fluttering behind him in the evening breeze.



THIRTY-FIVE

After helping Dweepa lie down on the bed, Anirudh sprinkled some water on the sage's face and shook him gently. A few agonizing moments later, Dweepa regained consciousness, relief written all over his face. He couldn't believe they had escaped unscathed from Kalanayaka's clutches—that they were both alive!

By the time Anirudh had finished telling Dweepa about all that had happened in the woods, the sage was looking at his student in amazement. While he was truly impressed with how Bhoomidevi had come to Anirudh's aid and how he was able to harness energy, Dweepa was unspeakably proud of the way Anirudh had dealt with the sorcerer. The sage was happy that he had discovered so much about his Kalki self on his own! But when his student recalled Kalanayaka's mysterious death, Dweepa feigned astonishment and concern.

Anirudh had gone silent. He was frowning as he breathed deeply and scratched between his brows. Dweepa recognized these signs. *He is perturbed about something ...*

'What is it, Anirudh?'

Anirudh looked up at Dweepa reluctantly, twiddling his thumbs.

'Tell me ...'

Anirudh sighed heavily, steeling himself. 'I believe Kalanayaka's death isn't a mystery after all. *I* made it happen.'

Dweepa's brows narrowed, though he was a little relieved. 'How so?'

‘Well, I did wish for it to happen, didn’t I? What if the wish got realized?’

Dweepa smiled at his lord’s innocence. ‘Wishing and willing it to happen are two *very* different things, Anirudh.’

Anirudh looked unsatisfied with this answer.

‘Consider the facts: When you were training here earlier, you wished the energy would transform. But did it? No. Today you believed ... you *willed* the energy to transform, and it worked! Just wishing for something doesn’t make it happen. It’s your will that matters. So it’s safe to say that you didn’t kill Kalanayaka, Anirudh. You didn’t bury him underground, you didn’t set the pit on fire. And you didn’t set the boulder down on the pit.’

Anirudh shook his head.

‘That’s settled, then. You didn’t kill Kalanayaka.’

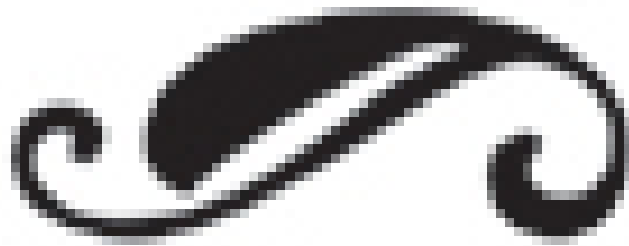
‘Then who did? How did he die?’ Anirudh asked, his tone heavy with doubt.

‘I shall answer that question soon, Anirudh. At the moment, I am more worried about the attack itself. This place is a secret! *You* are a secret! How did Kalanayaka track us? How did he know you are Kalki?’ he spat, limping away to the puja room. ‘Allow me to gather my thoughts.’

Anirudh gazed at Dweepa’s retreating figure, still thinking about the enigma of the sorcerer’s death. Something about the whole situation was bothering him, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. ‘What about Kalanayaka’s body?’

‘I’ll take care of it. You need not worry,’ Dweepa called.

Anirudh nodded, though his teacher’s answers hadn’t put him at ease. But he trusted Dweepa, so he decided not to pursue the matter further.



Anirudh and Dweepa were looking up at the endless night sky from the porch. The stars were twinkling a little brighter than usual.

‘Sage, why did you tell me to play the flute in the underwater chamber?’

Dweepa answered, ‘The lock on that slab was a very special one, I could tell. It did not require a key. The way to open such locks is air pressure, which has to be regulated at the correct frequency.’

Anirudh nodded slowly, trying to understand the concept.

‘In Lord Krishna’s times, such locks did exist, but were rarely used. So I deduced that the same mechanism was guarding the slab. And the key had to be Lord Krishna’s flute—the melody you played on it. It was the right frequency.’ Dweepa paused, appreciating the steps his lord had taken to protect the Kaustubha locket. ‘Really, a brilliant way to safeguard something so precious!’

As he absorbed this information, Anirudh, too, smiled at the ingenuity of the locking mechanism. It was like an ancient biometric system! ‘Is the Kaustubha really that precious?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes, it is,’ Dweepa said. ‘I would have *never* guessed that it was the Kaustubha that Lord Krishna had hidden! For he was never said to be in possession of the jewel. The Kaustubha was a ratna worn by Lord Vishnu. But it was not handed down to any of his avatars. Perhaps you are the only exception!’

‘But what is the significance of the Kaustubha? Why am I to treasure it?’

‘As mentioned in Lord Krishna’s note, you are to protect the Kaustubha because it’s the key to a terrible weapon ... though I don’t know what that is,’ he said before Anirudh could ask. ‘So this key should not fall into the wrong hands. About the Kaustubha’s significance, I will tell you what I know. The Kaustubha emerged from Ksheera Sagar during the Samudra Manthan—the churning of the ocean of milk for amrit, the nectar of immortality. This jewel represents the purity of mind and consciousness. But it’s so mesmerizing that it is said to make its bearer greedy. Thus the gem was given to Lord Vishnu. It is said that he is the *only* one who can wear it without letting his mind become corrupted with desire.’

Anirudh listening intently, fascinated by the power of the ratna.

‘That’s why I didn’t expect the circular locket to be the Kaustubha. It’s too important, and risky, to be brought to earth. And hiding it here for these many centuries? I can hardly believe that it has been safe all these years! I would suggest that you always wear it around your neck ... just like Lord Krishna advised. It will be safe with you.’

Anirudh stole another glance at the moon, his fingers curling around the locket resting on his chest.



THIRTY-SIX

Anirudh found himself standing in front of Dweepa's house. It was late afternoon. Looking around, he spotted no one.

'I am glad to see that you believed in yourself ...' came a melodic voice.

Anirudh swiftly turned to face the lady behind him. She was in the familiar tattered green saree. The once calm blue eyes were now just pale and sad.

'Bhoomidevi!' Anirudh whispered.

The goddess bowed to him, and Anirudh reciprocated.

'I knew you would be able to defeat Kalanayaka, my lord,' Bhoomidevi said.

'Please call me Anirudh ... I am not a lord.'

She didn't respond, but looked at him vacantly. 'I am tired of our children hurting me. But I would ... could never hurt them. And this evil man tried to kill you and Sage Dweepa! I couldn't let that happen. That's why I wanted you to know that you could vanquish him ... Not only him, but you can vanquish any person or force in this world if you just believe that you can,' Bhoomidevi urged softly.

She stepped closer to Anirudh and stroked his cheek. Tears streamed down her face.

'You came down to earth for *me*. And I won't let anything happen to you, Anirudh.'

Anirudh studied the cuts on her face. The gashes were pitifully deep and bloody. He raised his palm to her face and gently cupped her cheek.

Bhoomidevi closed her eyes, savouring her lord's tender touch, which took her pain away, even if it was for a moment. She wished that she could remain there forever, with him caressing her wounds. Then she would never feel any pain again. But she knew that was impossible. More tears rolled down her cheeks. The salty droplets aggravated her suffering.

In a voice thick with agony, she pleaded, 'Avenge me, Anirudh.'

Anirudh's heart ached for Bhoomidevi's plight. With moist eyes, he vowed, 'I will avenge you when the time comes, Devi. I promise.'

Bhoomidevi took his hands in hers and went on. 'Anirudh, you possess the *prakamya* siddhi. You can transform energy with just a thought. That's why you were able to harness energy and use it against Kalanayaka. All it requires is your belief and will, and I am glad that I could help you find it.'

Anirudh looked at his hands clasped in Bhoomidevi's. He croaked, 'Thank you, Bhoomidevi.'

She smiled. 'It's the least I could do for you, Anirudh.' Letting go of him, she stepped back. 'I have to go now.'

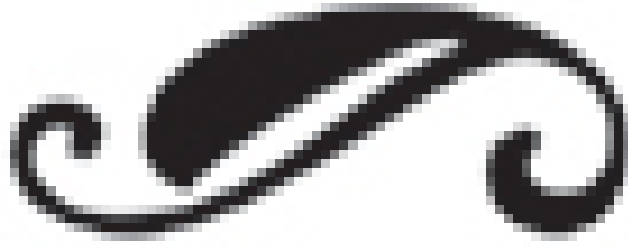
Bhoomidevi didn't want to leave Anirudh's side, just as he didn't want her to part from him; he wanted to take care of her and count on her support at all times. They both wept at the thought of separation.

And, in a flash, she vanished, darkening the world around him.

Anirudh's eyes fluttered open. His face was damp with hot tears and his pillow was soaked. He looked at his hands and remembered the soft caresses of Bhoomidevi.

So it was she who had instilled the belief and determination that he had tried so hard to find in the past! He thanked her under his breath. But Anirudh couldn't bear to see Bhoomidevi in such a sad state. He sat by the window, his thoughts returning again and again to the pain she was forced to suffer in silence. All because of mankind!

Anirudh couldn't figure out why he was feeling this way about Bhoomidevi. Whether he was thinking like a husband or a father, or simply a human being—he wasn't sure. But he resolved to avenge her.



Later that night, making sure Anirudh was fast asleep, Dweepa sneaked out to the courtyard, torch in hand. He walked to the boulder under which he had trapped Kalanayaka. Then, with some difficulty, he moved it aside, revealing the deep hole underneath. By torchlight, he found an unconscious Kalanayaka curled up at the bottom of the pit.

The spell is still working ...

The sage knew it was important to keep him in a comatose condition. While Anirudh was under the misconception that Kalanayaka's power lay in his staff, Dweepa was certain that he was formidable even without it. So the sorcerer had to be prevented from making an escape.

Dweepa levitated the limp body out of the hole and on to level ground. Spotting the two broken pieces of the staff lying a few feet away, he kept them next to Kalanayaka. Then, sitting cross-legged on the dewy grass, he shut his eyes.

Focusing his mind, he conveyed his thoughts to the person listening at the other end: *We have retrieved the treasure from the underwater room. But we were attacked by a powerful sorcerer called Kalanayaka. He intended to kill Kalki. But Kalki and I are safe. Kalanayaka has been defeated and is in my custody now. I have charmed him into unconsciousness.*



THIRTY-SEVEN

Kalaguru Bhairava was furiously pacing the length of the chamber. Kalarakshasa watched patiently as his adviser walked in circles.

Kalaguru finally came to a halt at the table. ‘Kalanayaka is dead! Kalki killed him! Kalki killed Kalanayaka! *That boy!* He is just a boy ... and that boy finished off our weapon!’ He turned to the wall behind him and punched it. The chamber rang from the blow. ‘Until yesterday, he didn’t possess any power. And today? Today he is spewing fire and hurling boulders on Kalanayaka’s head! How is that possible?’

Behind his red hood, Kalarakshasa clicked his tongue at Bhairava’s emotionality. He had purposely hidden the details of Kalanayaka’s mysterious death from his adviser. For he’d known—and was proven right—that the very mention of the sorcerer’s defeat would be enough to send Bhairava into a rage. Disclosing the peculiar circumstances of his killing to top it all was certain to set off panic bells in his head.

But the death bothers me too, the Demon of Time thought to himself. I was so consumed by the events that I didn’t even check for any signs of life—a stupid mistake on my part! Could he have been saved? No ... I doubt he is alive. But the more I think about it, the more certain I feel that Kalki could not have killed Kalanayaka—he is far too weak. And didn’t I spot surprise in his eyes when Kalanayaka was pulled into the ground and the fire erupted? So who killed him? Dweepa? No ... couldn’t be ... He was unconscious. This mysterious killer is indeed a concern.

Kalaguru took a deep breath and turned to the cloaked figure. 'I expected Kalki to be vanquished easily. He was NOT supposed to be this powerful. But things went horribly wrong today.'

'I don't know how, but Kalki was defending Kalanayaka's every attack,' Kalarakshasa spat.

Bhairava grunted.

'After Kalanayaka died, I debated whether to confront Kalki and finish him off myself. But as there was no way of knowing the avatar's potential now, I refrained from challenging him.'

'That was wise, my lord.' Bhairava sighed and finally sat down across from Kalarakshasa. 'All our plans have been upset now, haven't they, my lord?'

Kalarakshasa leaned towards Bhairava. 'I don't think so. The developments around Kalki haven't disturbed our plans. Our agenda is constrained only by time, not Kalki. Regardless of his existence, my plans *will* proceed smoothly. Yes, Kalki is a threat that I have factored in. But he can never stop me.'

'That's not what I meant, my lord. Kalki has now realized that there are people in the world out to kill him. So won't he and Dweepa try to seek them out, eliminate the threats?'

'Of course they will! But how will they come to know about us? The only person who jeopardized our existence has been buried by Kalki himself.'

'But ... what do we do on the off-chance that he does come to know of us?' Kalaguru asked cautiously.

The Lord of Time laughed mirthlessly, the echo reverberating in the stone chamber. 'Kalki will *never* find us ... Not until we reveal ourselves, my friend. But I respect your argument, Kalaguru. What do *you* think we should do if Kalki discovers us?'

Kalaguru smiled. 'Well ... I guess you could bring forward some of your other plans.'

Kalarakshasa looked at Bhairava, intrigued.

The adviser explained himself, 'For instance, I believe you could wear the armour now, instead of later.'

Kalarakshasa chuckled softly under his hood. 'I guess you are right, Kalaguru. It is indeed time ... I will also continue keeping an eye on Kalki and Dweepa.'

After a moment's pause, Kalarakshasa got up and motioned Bhairava towards the door. 'I have something to take care of. So I am going to meditate.'

Kalaguru Bhairava bowed and took his leave. But before he exited the chamber, Kalarakshasa asked him a question. 'Regarding the armour, do we know where the Guardian is?'

Bhairava turned to look at him, an evil gleam in his eyes. 'No, we don't. He keeps changing his location. But I can track him down.' With renewed cheer in his tone, he asked, 'Do you want me to find him, my lord?'

Sitting cross-legged on the cold floor, Kalarakshasa turned his hooded face to Kalaguru. 'At the earliest.'

Bhairava bowed again, a broad smile on his face, and shut the door behind him. Kalarakshasa looked away and closed his eyes.

I need to prevent them from looking into time ...



THIRTY-EIGHT

A lean figure, shrouded in a thick blanket, approached the dilapidated stone structure in the middle of the forest clearing. From behind thick clouds, the sun lit up the glade feebly, throwing him into relief. A heavy bag hung from the man's shoulder, and he walked with the support of a wooden stick, his right ankle temporarily dislocated. On his cleanshaven face were black eyes and a pointy nose. A short crop of wavy hair fell on his brow. His skin was wrinkled, a testimony to the fact that, at fifty, he had started ageing.

The stone building looked like an abandoned ruin, but the man knew that wasn't the case. When he reached the facade, he paused and glanced at the circular dome it had for a roof, perforated with gaping holes. Creepers and vines twisted around the dark walls. The man closed his eyes and waved his hands in front of him, his lips quivering as he chanted the age-old mantras. This was a custom he followed whenever he went somewhere new. He did this to shield that place with magic and protect it from supernatural forces. His incantation produced a unique charm that revealed his presence to only those whom he wanted to meet. It was a mantra created by his lord.

After a few moments, he opened his eyes and studied the building, satisfied. A locked door greeted him at the entrance. A wave of his hand, and it swung open. Contrary to the exterior, the room he walked into was large and well maintained. The cavities in the roof allowed sunlight to pour in. There were lamp brackets on the walls around him, as well as a couple of windows, though they were shut tight. The stuffy stench of disrepair

filled his nose, the undisturbed dust particles penetrating his senses. As he limped across the stone floor, faint clouds were stirred up with each step. At the far end of the room, he peered at something on the floor.

The wooden trapdoor.

With another wave of his hand, the trapdoor swung open. A flight of stone steps led down into the darkness. He brought out a torch from his bag and, flashing it down the stairs, slowly descended with cautious steps.

He reached the foot of the stairs and spotted a row of wall sconces to his right. Putting the torch away, he brought out a matchbox and lit the wax lamps one by one. The surrounding glass amplified the yellow illumination cast by the wick. Now he swept a careful look around the empty room.

He set his bag down on the floor, propped his stick against the wall and let the blanket fall from his shoulders. Bending, he fished out a leaf-wrapped bundle from his bag. Rummaging further, he brought out a heavy cloth bundle and untied it. As the folds of cloth unravelled, a small wooden chest came into view. Taking a key out of his bag, he unlocked the chest to reveal four boxes: a small rectangular one made of white marble, one made of black marble, a black stone box and a compact granite one.

His eyes gleamed with happiness as he studied the white marble box, which was covered with intricate carvings. Holding it gently between his fingers, the man straightened up and cautiously placed it on the floor, in the centre of the room. He retraced his steps to his bag and sat down, facing the white marble box, which was a few feet away from him. Putting the wooden chest back in his bag, he inhaled deeply, and, with his eyes shut, started chanting mantras, while his palms were turned towards the box.

After some time, he snapped out of his trance and looked at the result. What was once a small box was now a large marble structure—seven feet long and five feet in width—the engravings on it sprawling and elaborate. It stood at an impressive height of four feet. The man smiled, pleased with what he saw. He bowed his head in reverence.

My lord's coffin! One of the few treasures I swore to protect, but the most important one of them all!

The other valuables were safe inside the wooden chest. He had been guarding these objects for aeons. Initially, when he had taken up the responsibility, he used to remain in one place for a prolonged period of time as it was difficult to move the treasures around, especially the caskets. But a few centuries ago, from an ancient text he learnt the art of shrinking objects

as well as restoring them to their original form. The text was one of the many early writings he had been given, too, to protect. Having learnt that skill, he had been moving around frequently, making it difficult for people to track him down.

Each instance of a treasure being handed over to him was vivid in his memory. The casket in front of him, for instance. It had happened centuries ago, yet he remembered it like it were yesterday.

Having been summoned, he entered the palatial room illuminated by flickering lamps. Maroon silk drapes hung over yellow walls. The room was bare except for the large marble structure in front of him and the two people standing next to it. Their faces and figures were hidden under dark, billowy shawls. He bowed low, wondering why he had been asked to come here and who these people were. But, most of all, his eyes were drawn to the marble structure.

As if in response to his thoughts, the taller of the two men beckoned him, his hand on the cool white marble. ‘I would like you to guard this coffin forever ... Throughout the centuries to come, Koka ... But what I require of you at the earliest is to move it to a secure location ...’

Koka stared wide-eyed at his interlocutor. *But I am just a soldier!* he thought.

Two days later, when he left the palace in search of a suitable location to move the casket to, he was given the title of Guardian and blessed with long life—a really long life ...

Nowadays, the taller of the two men went by Kalarakshasa—his teacher—and the other man was Kalaguru Bhairava. The Guardian smiled, recollecting the memory.

A pang of hunger brought him back to the present. He unwrapped the other bundle and retrieved an apple from an assortment of fruit. Taking a gratifying bite, he admired the marble casket. With a smirk, he thought of the person whose body was resting inside.

Kalki’s arch-nemesis ... Kali!

WHAT IS A YUGA?

There are four yuga or ages in Hindu mythology: Satya, Treta, Dwapara and Kali. The yuga repeat themselves in a cyclical pattern of time.

As per Hindu cosmology, the life cycle of a yuga spans between 4.1 to 8.2 billion years—which constitutes just one full day for Brahma, the creator of the universe. And upon the destruction of each yuga, the earth resets.

According to Srimad Bhagavatam, the Satya yuga is 4800 demigod years long; the duration of the Treta yuga equals 3600 years; the Dwapara yuga extends over 2400 years; and the Kali yuga will last for 1200 years. One year for the demigods is equal to 360 years for human beings.

The four yuga follow a ratio of 4:3:2:1 and represent a gradual decline of dharma, wisdom, knowledge and emotional as well as physical strength of character.

- The Satya yuga was a period completely devoid of sin and evil.
- The Treta yuga was a period when evil was present in the world, but mankind still followed the path of goodness.
- The Dwapara yuga saw good and evil hang in equal balance.
- The Kali yuga, the current age, is one in which evil dominates the world. The Kali yuga is believed to have started with the death of Krishna.

ABOUT LORD VISHNU AND THE DASHAVATAR

Lord Vishnu is one of the most important gods in Hindu mythology. He is one among the supreme Trinity, or Trimurti, alongside Brahma and Shiva. It is said that Brahma is the creator, Vishnu the protector and Shiva the destroyer.

The word *dashavatar* is a combination of two words: *dasha*, meaning ‘ten’, and ‘avatar’, meaning ‘incarnation’. The Dashavatar refers to the ten avatars in which Lord Vishnu appears on earth. It is said that whenever evil grips the planet, Lord Vishnu comes to earth and defeats all malevolent forces.

Below is the sequence of the ten avatars assumed by Lord Vishnu across the yuga, which, some believe, reflects the theory of evolution:

1. Matsya: The avatar in which Vishnu takes the form of a fish and kills the demon Damanaka to save the Vedas and all of mankind.
2. Kurma: The avatar in which Vishnu takes the form of a turtle to help the devas and asuras churn the ocean of milk—in the event called the Samudra Manthan—for amrit, the nectar of immortality.
3. Varaha: The avatar in which Vishnu takes the form of a boar to rescue Bhoomidevi, or Mother Earth, from the clutches of the demon Hiranyaksha.
4. Narasimha: The avatar in which Vishnu takes the form of half-man and half-lion to defeat the demon Hiranyakashipu and save his ardent devotee, Prahlada. The name Narasimha comprises two words, *nara*, meaning ‘man’, and *simha*, meaning ‘lion’.
5. Vamana: The avatar in which Vishnu takes the form of a dwarf and then grows into a giant to rid the world of the virtuous king Mahabali, one of the Chiranjeevis (immortal living beings).

6. Parashurama: The avatar in which Vishnu takes the form of a Brahmin and kills Kartavirya Arjuna's entire army and then decimates all of the Kshatriya clan twenty-one times. The name Parashurama roughly translates to 'Rama with the battle-axe'.
7. Rama: The avatar in which Vishnu appears on earth as the righteous prince of Ayodhya and kills Ravana of Lanka to rescue his wife, Sita. Shri Ramachandra is one of Vishnu's most famous incarnations.
8. Balarama: The avatar in which Vishnu appears on earth as the elder brother of Krishna. He is said to be Krishna's constant companion and a knowledgeable agriculturist.
9. Krishna: The avatar in which Vishnu slays his evil uncle, Kansa, and many other demons, as well as plays an instrumental role in the events of the Mahabharata, preaching the discourse of the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna is the most well-known and beloved avatar of Vishnu.
10. Kalki: The avatar in which Vishnu acts as the harbinger of the end of the Kali yuga. The last incarnation of Vishnu, it is the only avatar of the protector god that is yet to manifest itself.

Some believe that Krishna is the eighth avatar of Vishnu, followed by the Buddha as the ninth, who is incorporated into the Hindu pantheon. Yet others believe that the Kalki avatar has already appeared on earth—as the Buddha, or even Jesus Christ. For they tried to shoulder the sins of mankind and show them the right path.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this book has been a journey for me, and I would like to convey my heartfelt thanks to those without whom I couldn't have completed it:

My parents, Ambika and Ashok, for they are the ones who introduced me to the world of stories and never let me run out of books. That's where my imaginative mind comes from, I believe. And my dear sister, Akshata, for her support and her mischief, and for being there for me.

Mrs Sowbhagyalakshmi, my schoolteacher, who was one of the first people to mention the concept of the four yuga and the Kalki avatar to me. Her words remain with me even today, some fifteen years later.

Sumedha and Ankur, the first readers of my manuscript, who gave me their honest feedback, which helped me improve the story.

Archith, Hemal and Anitha, who were supportive of my attempt at storytelling—with special mention to Hemal, with whom I discussed the concept of the series as a whole. Deliberating over the Kalki Chronicles with him helped me iron out the plot.

And all my friends and family for their support and encouragement.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all the folks at Red Ink Literary Agency and Penguin Random House India who made this book come to life, with special mention to:

Anuj Bahri, my agent, for his confidence in the Kalki Chronicles.

Sharvani Pandit, my editor at Red Ink, who helped me enormously by editing the manuscript and making it even more thrilling and worth showcasing to publishers.

Hemali Sodhi, my publisher and marketing partner at Penguin Random House India, for believing in my story and helping it see the light of the day.

Arpita Nath, my editor at Penguin Random House India, who painstakingly went through every line and suggested changes to me that I believe have helped shape the book to perfection.

Kankana Basu, my copy editor at Penguin Random House India, for helping with all the little details, perfecting the grammar and making sure the book was good enough to be on a shelf.

And finally, I would like to thank you, my reader, for giving me the chance to tell you a story. I hope the Kalki Chronicles entertains you as much as I intended it to.



THE BEGINNING

Let the conversation begin...

Follow the Penguin [Twitter.com@penguinIndia](https://twitter.com/penguinIndia)

Keep up-to-date with all our stories [YouTube.com/penguinindia](https://www.youtube.com/penguinindia)

Pin 'Penguin Books' to your [Pinterest](https://www.pinterest.com/penguinIndia)

Like 'Penguin Books' on [Facebook.com/PenguinIndia](https://www.facebook.com/PenguinIndia)

Find out more about the author and
discover more stories like this at [Penguin.co.in](https://www.penguin.co.in)

PENGUIN BOOKS

USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia
New Zealand | India | South Africa | China

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
India

First published in Penguin Books by Penguin Random House India 2018

This Collection Published by 2018

Copyright © Abhinav Menon 2018

The moral right of the author has been asserted

ISBN 978-0-143-44236-3

This digital edition published in 2018.

e-ISBN: 978-9-353-05293-5

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.